

A Long Sermon for Holy Week

Part 2

Good Friday : The Mystery of the Cross

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I think the best way to begin is to ask why Christ died on the cross. That we can give some kind of answer to this question in terms of the meaning and purpose of the life of Jesus is presupposed by the christian activity of 'preaching Christ crucified' two thousand years after the event. For our purposes, then, we can rule out the idea that it was all a tragic *misunderstanding which need never have happened* 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do', said Jesus of his executioners; but even if this means that they misunderstood him, the misunderstanding was not fortuitous. It was a misunderstanding that was in some way to be expected. In the gospels Jesus is presented not, indeed, as seeking his death or courting it but as realising that it was unavoidable. It is this unavoidability that we shall be looking at here, in Part Two of this 'long sermon'.

Scholars dispute about the circumstances of the death of Jesus but two facts seem fairly well established: Jesus was executed by the Romans because they found him a threat to the precarious stability of their colony; and they were encouraged to do this because Jesus was rejected by the leaders of his own people. I think that, in the end, the reason why he was thus rejected was that he claimed to 'speak with authority'; that is, he regarded attachment to his own person as more significant even than belonging in the ordinary way to the People of God in accordance with the Law. It was not, as modern exegetes (for so long enchanted by Martin Luther) used to believe, that Jesus preached a doctrine of God's grace which was opposed to the Law and legalism of the Jewish tradition; the Jewish tradition itself was a tradition of God's gracious love and freely-given covenant with his people, and the vast majority of Jewish people in the time of Jesus was *not* legalistic at all. The trouble for Jesus and for the members of the early Church was that they, Jews themselves, held that believing in the individual man Jesus—in other words, being what Paul called '*in Christ*'—was not just an alternative to the Mosaic covenant, but was the actual flowering and fulfilment of that covenant. (For this reason Paul was willing to accept non-Jews as

'members of Christ's body' without requiring that they become members of the covenant-people by circumcision; indeed, he thought it a betrayal of the Good News to demand that they become subject to the Law in this way.)

It was, I think, because of what must have seemed to them his monstrous egoism that the leaders of his people saw Jesus as a threat to religion and, of course, as a threat to their power within the religious society. The Jewish people were, indeed, devoutly awaiting the Visitation of the Lord (and for many of them this took the form of awaiting the messianic Saviour-King), but such an expectation is quite compatible with a failure to recognise it when it arrives. In Luke's story, Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, having read out one of the prophecies about the coming 'acceptable year of the Lord', said: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. Again, at the end of his gospel Luke has Jesus with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: 'And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself'. It was a central theme of the gospels that Jesus was recognisably the promised servant and messenger of God but that he was not recognised; and, moreover, that this very fact that his hearers were divided into those who recognised and those who did not is itself part of what makes him recognisable. This is one kind of answer to the question: Why did Christ die on the cross? He died because those who held power did not recognise in him the saviour they awaited and so found him merely a subversive nuisance, which was quite enough for the colonial power to have him crucified. The failure to recognise Jesus for what and who he is is attributed to 'hardness of heart' and I shall be suggesting in a moment that this comes down to a general human reluctance to accept the human when we meet it.

Before we go on to that, however, I would like to look briefly at another kind of answer to the question: Why did Christ die? This tries to answer the question: What had the death of Christ to do with us; why is it important to us? One such answer which has been very influential in the past is that by his death Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of the world. The idea, I'm sure you will remember, was that sin had offended God and since God is himself infinite such an offence has a kind of infinity about it. It was within the power of the human creature to offend by disobedience to God but it was not within our power to restore the balance of justice by any recompense we could pay to God. So God the Son became man so that by his suffering and death he could pay the price of sin. This seems to be based on an idea of punishment as a kind of payment, a repayment; the criminal undergoing punishment 'pays his debt to society', as we say. It takes a divine man, however, to pay our debt to divine justice.

Now, I can make no literal sense of this idea, whether you apply it to

criminals or to Christ. I cannot see how a man in prison is paying a debt to society or paying anything else at all to society. On the contrary, it is rather expensive to keep him there. I can see the point in the criminal being bound to make restitution to anyone he has injured, when that is possible; but that is not the same as punishment. I can see the point in punishment as something painful that people will want to avoid and so (we may reasonably hope) something to encourage them to avoid committing crimes; but this is not paying a debt. It is impossible to see Christ on the cross as literally engaged either in making restitution or in serving as a warning to others. If God will not forgive us until his son has been tortured to death for us then God is a lot less forgiving than even we are sometimes. If a society feels itself somehow compensated for its loss by the satisfaction of watching the sufferings of a criminal, then society is being vengeful in a pretty infantile way. And if God is satisfied and compensated for sin by the suffering of mankind in Christ, he must be even more infantile.

As St Thomas says, *satisfactio* really means restitution or 'paying damages'. It is indeed true that we could not afford to pay damages to God but it is also true that such payment could not be needed for plainly God cannot be damaged by my sin. If we are to talk of 'satisfaction for sin' we should be clear that we are using a rather remote metaphor. St Thomas himself, though he allows for this metaphor, has a quite different view of the point and purpose of the passion and death of Christ and this is the one that I shall be trying to explain: it was the supreme expression of Christ's love of the Father and his obedience to the mission his Father had given him.

There have been all sorts of variations on the 'satisfaction' theory in the history of christian thinking. There have been people who held that Christ suffered as a representative of the human race, people who, rather more oddly, thought that he suffered *instead* of the rest of the human race, and the really bizarre people who held that Christ's suffering was a ransom due in justice to the devil for the liberation of sinners who had sold themselves to him—that idea even surfaces in some parts of the liturgy of Holy Week. No theory and no metaphor is going to exhaust the mystery of the cross, and by the same token the most peculiar theories and models may have some light to shed on it provided we do not take them too literally. What I am offering is just one way of seeing the significance of the cross; not with the idea of explaining everything, but just as a possible story, and I think a better one than those I have mentioned.

In the first place, it seems to me that Jesus clearly did not want to die on the cross. He was not crazy, he was not a masochist, and we are, of course, told that he prayed to his Father to save him from this horrible death. Mark, Matthew and Luke all picture him as terrified and

miserable in the garden of Gethsemane. (By contrast, in John he is totally in control of the situation; but in the synoptics he is obviously panicking.) He came through this terror to a kind of calm in accepting the will of his Father, but he is quite explicit that it is not *his* will—‘not my will but thine be done’. He *did* want to accept his Father’s will even if it meant the cross, but he most certainly did not want the cross itself.

Well, then, did the Father want Jesus to be crucified? And, if so, why? The answer as I see it is again: No. The mission of Jesus from the Father is not the mission to be crucified; what the Father wished is that Jesus should be human. Any minimally intelligent people who are proposing to become parents know that their children will have lives of suffering and disappointment and perhaps tragedy, but this is not what they wish for them; what they want is that they should be alive, be human. And this is what Jesus sees as a *command* laid on him by his Father in heaven; the obedience of Jesus to his Father is to be totally, completely human. This is his obedience, an expression of his love for the Father; the fact that to be human means to be crucified is not something that the Father has directly planned but what we have arranged. We have made a world in which there is no way of being human that does not involve suffering.

Jesus accepted the cross in love and obedience, and his obedience was to the command to be human. Let me explain what I mean. As I see it, not Adam but Jesus was the first human being, the first member of the human race in whom humanity came to fulfilment, the first human being for whom to live was simply to love—for this is what human beings are for. The aim of human life is to live in friendship—a friendship amongst ourselves which in fact depends on a friendship, or covenant, that God has established between ourselves and him.

When we encounter Jesus, in whatever way we encounter him, he strikes a chord in us; we resonate to him because he shows the humanity that lies more hidden in us—the humanity of which we are afraid. He is the human being that we dare not be. He takes the risks of love which we recognise as risks and so for the most part do not take.

I suppose it is because we human beings have not come to terms with the extraordinary revolution which brought us into existence: the radical change from the animal which is simply part of nature, part of the great impersonal scheme of things, to the animal that, because it uses language, because it can express the world, and express itself, symbolically, to some extent stands over against nature and stands over against even its own nature. We are the animal that, in one of the Genesis stories, names all the animals in the world.

The first animal that is capable of personal love and lives in a linguistic and cultural society stands also in greatest need of this love which it has to establish. The human animal has left behind the solidly

established, genetically provided, structures of pre-linguistic animal social life; it now has to start developing its own. These newly-made social structures are fragile not only because they are no longer safely rooted in the genes but also because of the immensely increased power, and destructive power, that goes with them. Human social organisation provides greatly increased skills and powers of hunting and killing, and when it cracks the killing can turn in on society and become murder. The first-born of the first parents who have rejected the friendship of God is Cain.

But the very same developments that made the human animal the first murderer made it also the first lover. That paradox has been explored in poems and myths and theologies from the dawn of human culture and some of these myths have found their way into the Bible as it explores the mystery of human nature, the contradictions of our life, the way in which our aspirations to be loving and to be loved seem to twist themselves into evil and inhumanity.

For this reason we are afraid and we settle for being less than human. We recognise that our very nature calls us to something new and frightening; it calls us to communication, which means self-giving, self-abandonment, being at the disposal of others. We recognise, however dimly, that we are the kind of being that finds its fulfilment, its happiness and flourishing only in giving itself up, in getting beyond itself. We need to lose our selves in love; this is what we fear. We are summoned, simply from within ourselves, to venture into what is unknown, to abandon what is familiar and safe, and set out on a journey or quest. This is going to mean loss of the personality we think is all complete, it means being reshaped in ways we could not predict beforehand; all in obedience to a summons we do not understand and cannot control.

Of course, there is delight and wonder in this, as the world becomes fresh and astonishing and all sorts of unexpected possibilities appear in ourselves; but there is always this background of risk, and we do not like to take this risk. Mostly we settle for what we are, what we have made of ourselves. We settle for the person that we have achieved or constructed; we settle for our own self-image because we are afraid of being made in the image of God. This failure to respond to the summons into life, this failure of faith, is called sin.

All that is one way of talking about the human condition. I am sure you have other ways and the Bible presents many such ways, but they are all recognisably pictures of the same contradiction or paradox at the heart of our way of being human. Our greatest talents and creative powers turn against us in destruction unless they are in the service of love, unless they are used in obedience to this mysterious call to transcend ourselves. We cannot live without love and yet we are afraid of

the destructive creative power of love. We need and deeply want to be loved and to love, and yet when that happens it seems a threat, because we are asked to give ourselves up, to abandon our selves; and so when we meet love we kill it.

Not all the time, of course; there could not be any community at all without some friendship; but, still, we are uneasy with it, and love has to disguise itself if it is to survive. It is when love appears nakedly for what it is that it is most vulnerable; and that is why we crucified Christ. Jesus was the first human being who had no fear of love at all; the first to have no fear of being human.

Jesus had no fear of being human because he saw his humanity simply as gift from him whom he called 'the Father'. You might say that as he lived and gradually explored into himself, asking not just the question 'Who do men say that I am?' but 'Who do *I* say that I am?', he found nothing but the Father's love. This is what gave all the meaning to his life—the love which is the ultimate basis and meaning of the universe. However he would have put it to himself (and of this we know nothing), he saw himself as simply an expression of the love which is the Father and in which the Father delights. His whole life and death was a response in love and obedience to the gift of being human, an act of gratitude and appreciation of the gift of being human.

The Church seems to have begun as a community of men and women experiencing what they recognised as a sharing in the Father's delight in the expression of the love which is himself, his delight in his beloved son in whom he is well pleased. It was perhaps first in John's church that the recognition that this spirit they had received is the *divine* Spirit, the eternal delight of God, went with the recognition that Jesus, through whom they had received it, is the eternal *divine* expression of God's love, his Word. Out of this was born the doctrine of the Trinity, the Church's way of safeguarding the tremendous truth that the Spirit we have received from the Father through the life and death and resurrection of his Son Jesus is not some created gift, some perfection of our human life, but nothing other than the life of God himself.

If we are lucky, we know something of what it is like to be conscious that we are loved. We know the freedom and joy and release that this gives. I see the self-consciousness of Jesus as something like that: as he grew up his increasing self-awareness must have been his increasing awareness of being loved—it is this, surely, that shaped his notion of the Father. You might say that the whole of his teaching was summed up in this: that the Father loved him and that his followers, those who believed in him, were invited into their love. It is very remarkable that nowhere in the New Testament is it said that Jesus had faith; he is presented always as he in whom and through whom we have faith in the Father's love; his life is the life in which we share by faith. This is not a psychological

statement about what it was *like* for Jesus to be aware of the Father's love—no document of the New Testament shows any interest in that kind of question. It is a theological statement about how Jesus stands in relation to us—not as one who is divinised but as the one in whom we are divinised, brought to share in the Father's life and love.

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This threat that Jesus posed to the established church and the colonial power is the historic sign of the threat he poses to each individual and to every human society and establishment. The reaction to that threat by crucifixion was just the public face of the reaction we call sin. Every human society is a human attempt to make love, to search for a way of living in friendship; for we have life by sharing a life through and in symbols, through communication. But all structures of communication that we develop turn eventually with a terrible inevitability into structures of domination—no longer ways of sharing life with another but of taking life from another. In the end, every human society becomes structured by violence. We live in the capitalist order, perhaps the most violent large-scale society that history has known, the society that has invented and produced means for killing on an unimaginable scale—even to destroying the whole human race; but the actual killing, the shedding of blood, is only the culmination of the continual taking of life, the exploitation of the lives of others. A society in which some people live by slowly crushing life out of the majority is bound to erupt from time to time into mass killing. But quite apart from war, which has anyway its own function in our economy, our society depends in the end on violence and the fear of violence, on policemen and torturers and prisons within the country and nuclear threats between countries. The society in which Jesus lived was not different in principle. A less technically sophisticated society, it lacked the machinery for violence that we have perfected. I suppose crucifixion might seem a relatively mild death compared to the things that are being done as I write this to some people living under military dictatorships, but crucifixion was favoured by the Roman colonial power, I think, especially for its symbolic value, for what it said. It was essentially death by public helplessness. If you rebelled against the power of Rome or if as a slave you rebelled against the rich, your masters, you were tied or nailed to a stake and left for everyone to see you dying of pain and

cramps and thirst and exhaustion. If, like Jesus, you were lucky and they whipped you first with metal scourges, you lost blood and died more quickly. He died remarkably quickly, in fact; some people took days, writhing powerlessly in continual pain as a living and dying symbol of the power and domination of the rulers.

It is pretty generally accepted nowadays that in spite of the mode of his execution Jesus was not himself a political subversive in the ordinary sense. He was not attracted by the nationalist freedom-fighters or terrorists we have come to call the Zealots, though some of them were attracted to him and became his followers. But the occupying power rightly saw him as a danger because, with his considerable following and the hostility between him and the powerful Priestly group (especially after his disruptive demonstration in the Temple), he was clearly a source of instability in an already very tense political situation. Jesus, so far as we can tell, did nothing to justify action by the colonial power, but he was not prepared to cease from his mission when he saw what it would lead to. He was not a political leader seeking directly to alter the structures of power, but he was, and knew he was, a figure of sufficient political importance to be judicially murdered. He had to be got rid of.

So my thesis is that Jesus died of being human. His very humanity meant that he put up no barriers, no defences against those he loved who hated him. He refused to evade the consequences of being human in our inhuman world. So the cross shows up our world for what it really is, what we have made it. It is a world in which it is dangerous, even fatal, to be human; a world structured by violence and fear. The cross shows that whatever else may be wrong with this or that society, whatever may be remedied by this or that political or economic change, there is a basic wrong, persistent through history and through all progress: the rejection of the love that casts out fear, the fear of the love that casts out fear, the fear that without the backing of terror, at least in the last resort, human society and thus human life cannot exist.

The cross, then, unmask or reveals the sin of the world. In this sense the crucifying of Jesus is the archetypal sin of mankind, the root and meaning of our original 'sin', which is the lack of grace and moral weakness we suffer from, not (first of all) by committing any sin, but just by belonging to, originating in, the human species, the animal that has not come to terms with its new kind of animality. This twist in the human condition is what St Thomas calls the *materia*, the psychological expression of the sin of the world. What gives it its real significance (its *forma*) is the rejection of God's love that was most clearly demonstrated in the killing of Jesus. As we all know only too well, even when we have been liberated by faith and baptism from the sinfulness of original sin and become children of God in Christ, the psychological distortion in our human nature remains with us until we are fully restored at the

resurrection. With the cross the alienation of humankind is recognised as sin, and for that very reason recognised as something that can be forgiven.

From one point of view the cross is the sacrament of the sin of the world—it is the ultimate sin that was made inevitable by the kind of world we have made. From another point of view it is the sacrament of our forgiveness, because it is the ultimate sign of God's love for us.

In one very important sense the Father can only love the Son because only in the Son does he find an equal to love. He can be kind and considerate to his creatures as such, he can shower gifts and blessings upon them, but in so far as they are simply his creatures he cannot give himself, abandon himself to them in love. That is why any unitarian theory, or any Arian theory that diminishes the divinity of Christ, leaves us as our only image of God that of the supreme boss. It leaves us, in the end, with a kind of master/slave relationship between God and his creatures. In a sense it leaves us with an infantile God who has not grown up enough to have learnt to lose himself in love. Such a God may be a kind and indulgent boss, but he remains a master of slaves—even if they are well-treated slaves. I think that modern atheism since Nietzsche is a rejection of the idea that the deepest truth about mankind is that we are slaves.

If, however, with traditional Christianity, we take the Trinity seriously, we too have to reject that idea. For the Christian tradition, the deepest truth about people is that they are loved. But that is only possible because we have been taken up into the love that God has for his Son; God loves us because we are in Christ and share his Spirit. We have been taken up to share in the life of love between equals which is the Godhead.

We were buried, therefore, with Christ by baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life; not just newness of human life but the new life which is sharing in divinity: our receiving of the Holy Spirit. God's love for us therefore is expressed and made possible by the Son becoming human, but the supreme expression of his humanity in our kind of world is the cross. The cross is the sign that Jesus is the first really human being, the first one to live and die, sheerly through love. That is why the cross, as well as unmasking our sinfulness, is also the sign of our forgiveness, the sign that the Father unconditionally accepts us, even though we are sinners. Whether we are sinners or not does not matter to God, his love comes to us anyway, but because we are sinners it begins in us the difficult and painful process of transforming us into saints.

In the 48th Question of the *Tertia Pars*, St Thomas allows for a whole variety of ways of seeing what we now call the 'atonement': Christ's death is a kind of sacrifice, a kind of redemption, a kind of satisfaction for sin, and so on. Characteristically, he finds a place for all

sorts of insights where others have been hypnotised by one model or another. But in all cases St Thomas finds the rationale of the atonement in the loving obedience of the man Jesus. He is very insistent that it is Jesus as a human being who does the work of our salvation, acting of course through the grace of God and acting as the instrument of God, but acting as a human being, a saint. It is this loving obedience displayed finally on the cross that merits for Jesus his resurrection and the salvation of his followers. We are not saved by the intervention of a god but by the great sanctity of one of ourselves, a sanctity great enough for his prayer for us to be heard.

For the cross is a prayer and, indeed, the only prayer known to Christians. All our prayers are prayers only by sharing in the prayer of the cross, the exchange between Jesus and the Father in which Jesus offered the whole of his life to the Father and the Father raised him from the dead.

On the cross Jesus finally abandons himself to the Father. His life work has ended in failure. It looked very optimistic at first: the crowds gathering to hear all those attractive things they needed to hear and received with such enthusiasm, but now all that has collapsed. His followers have deserted him, the foremost of them has disowned him, he has been arrested and condemned, the crowds who once listened to him are now howling 'Crucify him, crucify him'. The whole attempt to form a little community of friends based on himself and, through him, the Father's love, one in which people could relate to each other in love and mutual forgiveness instead of domination and submission, has been a complete failure. Nevertheless, his mission was not to be a world leader but just to be human and accept the consequences of being human, which culminate in defeat. He accepts his failure and refuses to compromise his mission by using the weapons of the world against the world. It is his Father's mission and it is for the Father to bring his own purposes out of Jesus's failure. Jesus knows he is not going to live to establish the Kingdom. Jesus established nothing, founded nothing, achieved nothing. He did not transform the world; the colonial society went on as before; the same kinds of bitterness and meanness and hatreds went on as before. In death on the cross he handed over all the meaning of his human life to the Father; this is his prayer. The Father has not accomplished his will through any success of Jesus; Jesus is left with nothing but his love and his obedience, and this is the prayer to the Father to work through his failure.

And, of course, the answer to that prayer is the resurrection, when the Father through the dead but risen Christ *does* accomplish his loving will for human creatures. Through the risen Christ the Spirit is poured out upon all men, or, to put it another way, the relationship between Jesus and the Father, between the Son and the Father, is extended to all

men.

Before his death Jesus had tried, but in the end failed, to bring the Spirit of love to a small group of disciples; now through him the Father pours the Spirit throughout the world; by this the world is to be transformed into a community of love, the Kingdom of God.

Christian prayer is never simply the appeal by the creature to the creator. The cross and resurrection are the eternal dialogue of Father and Son as projected on to the screen of history, what it looks like in history. If you want to know what the Trinity looks like be filled with the Holy Spirit and look at the cross. The Trinity, when reflected in our history, like something reflected in rippling water, looks pretty strange, just as the human being in our history looks strange, being despised and crucified: *Ecce homo*.

All our prayer is some kind of sharing in that eternal dialogue, the exchange represented by the cross: this is the only prayer there is. The eucharist is, of course, the principle sacrament of Calvary, but all our prayer is some kind of participation in the human voice of the Son of God addressing his Father. It is by sharing in this sacrificial prayer that we enter into our divine life and take our part in the mystery of the Trinity. I shall say more of this when we come to look at the mysteries of resurrection, the mysteries of Easter night.

From Inwardness to Social Action: A shift in the locus of religious experience

Charles Davis

There is now general agreement that Christians, in virtue of their Christian commitment, should engage in social and political action, particularly on behalf of the poor and oppressed. That is the presupposition behind liberation theology. At the same time the conviction persists that social and political action is not properly religious action, but, strictly speaking, only the consequence or overflow of religion into a non-religious, secular sphere. Hence the felt necessity, especially on the part of those with religious authority, to qualify the

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