

## “He gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20)

In the cold light of day I don't hold the fond fancy that Jesus of Nazareth held in his dying mind the lineaments of my face. I know he thought about the passers-by who mocked him, the criminal who died beside him, the mother and disciple who stood beneath him. I believe he was consciously aware that he was dying *for them* as individuals; he drew a line in his lifetime between his mother's and brothers' expectations of *him*, and his true mission for *them*; and I see no reason to suggest that he modified that act of judgment during the Passion. He must have been applying the determination to carry the Cross (which Peter had sought to prevent) to these people who were present to him in the body as he died.

I was not present to him in the body. Neither was Paul; yet he uses this phrase - *he gave himself for me* - about the handing-over of the Son of Man. I need to find some way in which the statement can make credible sense. Paul's more usual phrase, *He died for us*, is different, because the *us* is the human us, the family; we need to spell out the relationship between his death and the humanity that unites us. That is less challenging. I believe that every thoughtful, costly project, every integrated life that has been lived for a single purpose, has tried to penetrate to the heart of being human, has tried to unite its forces against all that threatens humanity. The prophets and thinkers and religious leaders of our human story have all offered their light and wisdom to this search for a meaning that will unite the self and the human community. It is in this context that Jesus lived and mysteriously died *for all*. Everyone who joins in the search for human meaning must meet up with Jesus and make up his or her mind about him. Those who understand him will accompany him, and will become able to say he gave himself not only for us, but *for me*. There are, of course, implications.

*We pray earnestly that the same love which made Christ ready to be crucified for us may, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, have the effect of making the world crucified to us, and ourselves crucified to the world*

These words of Fulgentius depict a Christianity which participates specifically in the moment of sacrifice, as its spiritual apogée and defining summit. To this moment we have access in the Eucharist: because the context of the Eucharist is the Last Supper, where Jesus in his final historical moments of complete freedom lays down his life *to the Father, for his friends*. His laying down his life *to the Father* is natural to him as Son of God: it is the eternal Trinitarian rôle of the Son so to do. His laying down his life *for us* is the fulfilment of his earthly mission, in that he pours out for us what he pours out to the Father, and we see in his weeping over Jerusalem and over the grave of Lazarus, and his breaking of the bread at the Supper, the eternal lineaments of the Son of God projected in earthly realities, present in historical facts.

Our Christianity lies in accepting as our agenda the truth we see in him. The depth of what he does must give us reason to live and to die in grace. But why *crucified*? Why is the gift of meaning not bestowed peacefully and creatively from above, and welcomed graciously and with gratitude below? Because we accept lesser meanings for ourselves, which happen to be more immediately alluring and convincing, and hold to them tenaciously; and because these lesser meanings fall short of our true destiny, they bear fruit in unforgiveness, pitiless crime, and violence, the cutting-short of our kindness and the frustration of the working of grace. There is death in our shortened meanings, in our cheaper understanding of love, and it makes us not only deathbound ourselves, but murderers of one another. Our murder of Jesus is the summit of this truth, because he is the Son of God made flesh. But his intention to suffer this punishment at our hands is also the Gospel about God. The crucifixion of the world to us represents the cost to us of accepting his Gospel in place of our deathbound agenda. It is beyond hope that we might ourselves escape crucifixion - in whatever form it comes - if we try like Jesus to live in eternal love, and stay like him, *to the end*, in the unloving world.