

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Jesus

It has taken us four weeks to reach the moment when we start to talk about Jesus. We've been enquiring into the nature of God, wondering at the questions posed by Creation, and taxing our brains with the mysterious presence of evil. These things are in some sense beyond our reach. When we come to consider Jesus, we find a subject that is absolutely within our reach; a man with a history, born in a time and place, living for a set number of years. He, we may feel, is no theory or question: he is a fact, and a human fact at that.

No-one should let a sceptical modern frame of mind rob them of that. Jesus of Nazareth is no mythical figure. Insofar as we can investigate facts that were so obscure and humble two millennia ago, we can be perfectly certain that he existed, and that he began a movement, and that he died a violent judicial death early in what we now call the first century. It's hardly surprising that we know so little of him from independent witnesses - history is not written around failed religious leaders from unknown districts in forgotten provinces. But the movement that he founded showed an amazing power of survival, depending as it did on an unlikely story about an executed criminal returning to visit his erstwhile supporters.

The facts are sensational enough to stop us in our sceptical tracks. If you wanted to invent a new religion, would you centre it on a dead criminal? If he had been crucified - and in those days people knew what crucifixion was: its sound, its sight, its smell - would you report to the new converts that he'd said several times

If you want to be a follower of mine, you must take up your Cross and come behind me.

It wasn't easy to become a Christian, once the name had been thought up, and the Jews had cut the umbilical cord. It wasn't a good time to be disowned by the Jews, and suspected of treason by the Romans. A Christian's life wasn't worth much to the authorities, and the Romans had easy ways of disposing of people. So Jesus' words about taking up the Cross were far from rhetorical; people began very early to be given a choice between their new faith and a gory death.

In first century culture, also, Christianity seems uniquely unsaleable. Intelligent discourse in the Roman Empire was under Greek influence; and the Greeks had decided long ago that the best things about human beings were their spiritual powers. The Greeks found the body embarrassing and crude - and also fatally flawed; people kept dying of it! The Greek ideal was a religion that would free us from the body, and let our liberated spirit soar into the pure ether of spiritual life. Here, instead, was a new faith that seemed obsessed with *saving* the body, and condemning its adherents to live physical lives in eternity. *Bad news!* The Athenians laughed at Paul on the Areopagus for attempting to preach it.

From Jewish converts, the early church asked what felt like apostasy - the betrayal of all their forefathers had suffered for, the abandonment of the sacred practices and the Jewish feasts, the admission of “gentile sinners” as equals, and above all the blasphemous assertion that a crucified carpenter from Galilee were somehow equal to the God of Abraham. The changing of the Sabbath into Sunday must have been the last straw. Many Jewish Christians had to part from their all-important families on their conversion: “*Anyone who prefers father and mother to me is not worthy of me!*” We shouldn’t translate the words of Jesus into spiritual terms; young Jewish Christians lost their fathers and mothers, their homes, and their safety: “*People who kill you will think they are doing a holy duty for God.*”

Why is the following of Jesus so radical, and why was the early Church so keen on that fact, so that the Christian Church ever since has taken its closeness to suffering as its hallmark? It is because something in Jesus builds a direct bridge between suffering and life. Of all the things we can be offered as a gift to help us live, nothing could be deeper or more vital than the key to suffering, the way to open a door in the depths of it that will make it acceptable. Earthly communities offer comfort and enhancement of earthly happiness: join up, and enjoy this or that earthly benefit. To join with Christ, you need to have had a taste of affliction, and to know that your great quest in life is to make sense of it. The most trivial worldling will take note of this, however far he may be from conversion. Few people feel free directly to mock Jesus Christ, however much his stumbling followers go under the cosh of satire.

What people sense in the Christian message is that suffering is the dark side of the true coin of the universe. No way of life which ignores suffering can be credible. No way of life which sets it at the heart of the story can be accepted. But Christianity declares that **the most extreme suffering imaginable is compatible with the highest ideal of joy**: and the resolution of this enigma lies in the person of Jesus Christ himself. That is why the truest portrait of him that we can present is actually the crucifix, in which we see his humanity being obliterated in favour of his devotion to life. It is the spelling out of this relationship between sorrow and joy that has occupied the Christian Church for its remarkable pilgrimage through human history.

I would like to read a piece of writing from the first century. It is set on the lips of John the Baptist by the Fourth Evangelist. John is talking about Jesus:

**He who comes from heaven is bearing witness
to things he has seen and heard,
but his testimony is not accepted by anybody;
though anyone who does accept his testimony
is attesting that God is true,
since he whom God has sent speaks God's own words,
for God gives him the Spirit without reserve.
The Father loves the Son, and has entrusted everything into his
hands. Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life.
But anyone who refuses to believe in the Son will never see life:
God's retribution hangs over him.**

The Christian mystery states that human love constitutes our likeness to God, in other words that it is in our power to love that we are "in the image of God". Genesis said:

*In the image of God he created them, male and female he
created them, and he said to them: increase, multiply*

This fruitful, creative love is our door into the likeness God has created in us. In Jesus something more is present: he is not merely *in the image of God*, he is actually living the divine life; love is poured into him without measure, and he receives it without measure, and he pours it out to the Father without measure.

This unmeasured giving is actually the tenor of the life of the Holy Trinity, irrespective of the Incarnation: it is the reason why the Son whom the Father begets is God: God the Father gives him life, not as an offcut or mingled gift, like the life we receive from our earthly parents: but divine in its fulness, unmeasured. But to receive unmeasured the gift of divine life is actually to be God. Furthermore, the life that is given is nothing less than God (is God the Holy Spirit).

- It is in giving the whole of divine life to the Son that God becomes God the Father;
- it is in receiving the whole of divine life from the Father that God becomes God the Son;
- it is in being the gift of the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father that God becomes God the Holy Spirit.

But these gifts, these transactions have no date: they are eternal truth, and there is no time when they wait to be fulfilled.

When it comes to the life of Jesus Christ on earth, what we see is the living out of that eternal vocation in a human life-span. The consequences for us of a vocation to share in the divine life are spelled out in the earthly career of Jesus.

The ancient instinct that “it is death for a man to look on God” comes into play here. If the Father is to love us, he must pour the divine life into us as he does into God the Son. Our task is then to receive this gift (which is God the Holy Spirit) *without measure*, as Jesus does. The *obedience* this calls out in us has to be measureless too: and this bears fruit in the joy which belongs to the children of God, taking possession of our spirit: and also in the physical pouring-out in love which is called *sacrifice*, verified in our bodies.

This is where suffering makes its entry into the equation. You may say that dying is something definitely on the human agenda, not the divine. But Jesus is never more Son of God than when his last drop of blood pours generously from his side on the Cross. You can see at once that if this were humanly fun or fulfilment, it would lose its likeness to God, and become a selfish fact with a merely earthly explanation. Instead, the gift involves all he has to give: it involves his death.

In the same way we can call our care for each other, say, as parents, an instance of our likeness to God, who is father and mother to the Universe. But when we enjoy the sight of our growing children, when we are overwhelmed with joy at their success or their beauty, there is every earthly reason to enter into the experience. When, instead, they cost us our heart's blood in grief, disappointment, even offence, we know that we are suffering for them in a way that is a pouring out of our life for them *without reserve*. That is when we are most like God. So suffering becomes the irreplaceable currency of human love, the truest and most trustworthy guarantee of love: love that bears the stamp of the Holy Trinity. In this way it becomes clear to us that to draw close to God is quite compatible with suffering - even the sort of suffering that is an obliteration - in other words, our death. Thus the Crucifixion and its utter necessity - written in our Lord's human flesh from the moment of his conception: he must carry the burdened flesh until it lies in the grave. This is what a human being must do to come to God.

So we should never think that Jesus died “for” human beings alone. Many of us were implicated in his death; but there was no human being there who could have spelt out the meaning of his death: not Caiaphas, not Pilate, not Judas, not Peter: not Mary his mother, not the Beloved Disciple. All stood silent before him, as the divine secret buried in his own human heart worked its slow way to complete self-gift, the pouring-out of the Son to the Father. He died for his Father, he died to express his vocation as Son of the Father in human terms. If we want to know what it is to be human, we must come to Calvary, where the Son of God teaches us the divine word which unlocks our mystery. To understand “human”, we've got to understand “divine”. We will never finally understand another human being, until we have begun to understand God. And the only one who can be our teacher is the Christ, who is faithful to humanity up to the crowning moment of his death *because* he is faithful to God in the outpouring of his whole life.