

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

The Cross

I'm Not Religious In trying to come to terms with Jesus of Nazareth, some people for whom religion is a nasty word have tried to distil from him a meaning which can be separated from his religious call: for instance, people have tried to frame him as a moral authority, or as a preacher of humanism. Jesus will not really have much importance in these stakes. As a moral teacher he said practically nothing that was really original, with the possible exception of his teaching on the indissolubility of marriage: he didn't get that from his Jewish upbringing. Nearly every other moral principle he endorses is to be found in the Old Testament; in other words, Jesus' moral teaching of his Jewish compatriots was *Be good Jews*.

As a humanist Jesus certainly values human life, every human life, very highly. But his respect for it depends entirely on his understanding that it is life lived in the presence of God the Father. We can't isolate any principles from him that might eliminate that understanding.

Jesus is fundamentally religious, and the religion he preaches is centred on the Father, and on himself as the one who reveals the Father (principally by his obedience). The greatest obedience, and therefore the greatest revelation, is his going to the Cross.

Is Your Way Of The Cross Really Necessary? All four Gospels say that Jesus predicted the Passion. He knew as he went on more and more about the way his life would end. His friend Peter was vigorously committed to Human Life As We Know It, and opposed Jesus when he announced this Plan ahead of time. Although Jesus issued a stinging rebuke to Peter's contradiction of the Cross, it was against Peter's principles to give up. He kept silent when Jesus got onto the subject after that (surely Jesus noticed, and was sorry for it); the Gospels charitably say *they did not know what he meant, and were afraid to ask*. In fact they *had* heard what he said, but they rejected and opposed him, and so they kept silent. It's significant that Peter is carrying a sword when the crisis comes, and although his performance with it is nipped in the bud by Jesus, his subsequent collapse and exit is the sign that his own agenda had come to an end. There is far more truth than treachery in his "denial": *I swear to you, I don't know that man*.

We must conclude that the Cross was entirely necessary, and not an accident. Jesus himself is implicated in it: he could have evaded it by avoiding Jerusalem, keeping away from confrontation with the authorities, reining in the enthusiasm of his disciples, etc. There isn't the slightest trace of the suicidal in his teaching;

he was known to love life; it can only be that he knew that his calling lay in the forcing of the crisis, the confrontation which - given his own pacifism - could only have one ending. When he asks, *Could not my Father have given me twelve legions of angels?* he is saying that the Cross is his act of obedience.

The necessity of the Cross is therefore a *religious* necessity; it proceeded from within the heart of Jesus rather than the politics of Caiaphas or the government of Pilate. And we can go further and say that the human hearts of his followers were revolted by it, and that they dispersed, abandoning him rather than sharing in it. It is uniquely his agenda, *not* that of his movement; and for those of us who believe in his divine life, it is dictated by the divinity within him: he dies because he is the Son of God, and as such he becomes in his human story what he is in his divine life: a total sacrifice to God the Father.

That's why he tells the Twelve: *You cannot come with me now.*

But Jesus knew that this Way he was travelling alone would become the Christian way to which his followers would be called. He seems to warn Peter at the sword-drawing in the garden that he might come to a sticky end:

Put the sword into its scabbard.

Those who draw the sword will perish by the sword

It seems ironic that Peter's survival now will be so that he can end up crucified upside down in the Vatican Circus in thirty-five years' time: an even stickier end. The aim is to avoid violence and murder: but *it is not to avoid death*. Jesus directs his steps purposely towards this death which has so deep a significance.

Our Search For Meaning And The Cross We must sustain the point that the Cross has a far deeper meaning *for Jesus* than for any other actor in the drama of the Passion; and that this meaning is drawn from the divine sphere, not the human. The Gospels clearly show a Jesus who is moving through the story with a purpose unsuspected by the others. In Mark's Gospel this has even generated a whole literature, investigating what has been called "the messianic secret": Jesus won't even let his disciples use the word "Christ" about him, because their understanding of the term is totally different from his. So Mark sees the Cross as the summit of Jesus' *teaching*; he teaches them by a death whose massive meaning has never been exhausted, in which the highest ideals meet the lowest motives, and the most selfless love meets the forces of fear, brutal cruelty, and abused power: the senselessness of history which has carried away so much humanity.

It is our task to sustain this awesome sacrament of the Cross, letting its endless significance dawn on us by long meditation, which draws us closer throughout our own life to the one whose life was spent on it, who said

This is my body, broken for you.

