

Faith

We start our analysis of faith by a simple statement of fact. While it is obvious to every reader of the New Testament that faith is supreme in the life of the Christian, this is not true in the profession of other forms of religion. We cannot properly call these other religions “faiths.” *Mystical* religion, for example, does not speak of faith but of the experience of oneness or becoming one with the Infinite. Neither does *primitive* religion speak of faith; it lives by the encounter with numinous things, events and forces. *Speculative*, philosophical religion, again, does not speak of faith but of knowledge of the Divine. These three types of religion have one common denominator: they have no relation to history; they are non-historical or ahistorical.

In Christianity, however, relation to a historical event is dominant. We are Christians because we are related to a historical fact, that fact of history which we all know, the person of Jesus Christ in whom God

has revealed himself and by whom man's situation is changed from one of being lost to one of being redeemed. The gospel of Christ witnesses to this fact as being absolutely decisive for man, and that through his faith. This fact not only is unique; it is explicitly spoken of as unique. It is not unique by comparison, because it is above comparison. It is unique by its very nature as unprecedented and unrepeatable. Redemption or reconciliation either has never happened or it has happened once for all.

The prologue to the Fourth Gospel has stated this fact and given the formula of its uniqueness in the concept which has become basic for all Christian theology: the Word has become flesh. By this formula it is not denied but, on the contrary, affirmed that God has revealed himself and his Word before the coming of Jesus Christ. This was, of course, through the prophetic Word. What marks the revelation through Jesus Christ is that this Word has now become flesh, creaturely life or, in common terminology, historical person. And the same author, John, in his First Epistle, accentuates this historical factuality by writing: "That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have beheld, that which we have touched with our hands." You see, four times he asserts the historical factuality. In terms of our own thought we might say that the eternal Word has incorporated itself, become a fact in historical time.

The witnesses to this fact are the apostles. As we have just heard from John, they are eyewitnesses;

that is, they can testify that this fact is a fact in history, in the order of reality that we grasp with our natural organs of perception. "We have seen, we have heard, we have touched with our hands" – this is one side of the event: On the other hand, the real significance, the divine Word in this flesh, is not something that can be grasped with our senses. That Jesus is the Christ "is not," as Jesus says to Peter, "revealed by flesh and blood but by my Father who is in heaven." This two-sidedness of the fact is that which was later formulated in the doctrine of the "two natures" of Christ. He is a man like us, but at the same time he is Immanuel, which means "God with us." "God was in Christ this is the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ, the God-man, truly man, truly God.

Now we must ask, Why is this so all-important? What difference does it make to me whether this is so, or not? The apostles answer this question by speaking of the work of Jesus Christ. They speak of his work in such terms as "revelation," "redemption," "salvation," and thus they explain the change in the condition of man which is brought about by Jesus Christ, seen or apprehended by faith. What this faith is we shall see later. First we have to make clear what the fact is to which this faith is related; more precisely, what this fact means to faith and why it is so essential that this fact be seen as unique, *once for all*.

Turn again to the prologue of Saint John's Gospel; he uses such words as life, light, grace, and truth. Man's situation is such that he does not know God,

that he is devoid of truth, that therefore he is in darkness and separated from God, the true Life. With his own reason he may form certain ideas of God through philosophical or metaphysical speculation. But this does not help him much – although it is not quite without significance – because the God that man *thinks* is not the God who himself speaks and acts, not the God who opens his heart and reveals his purpose, not the God of love, not the God who is Love. But it is just this that matters, because to know the God who is Love – the God who loves us sinful, rebellious men in spite of what we are – this is precisely the good news; this is the turning point in man's history.

The New Testament uses the word “redemption” to mark this change, and it points particularly to the cross of Christ as the point at which this change takes place. It is not, as has often been asserted, Saint Paul only who stresses this; we find the same emphasis in the writings of John, in Hebrews, in the epistles of Peter, and in the Synoptic Gospels, where the story of the Passion of Jesus is related with more detail than any other event. But again it is never a so-called objective fact that is indicated. It is always that fact of history as seen with the eyes of faith; just that and nothing else. The cross of Christ is the point where God's love meets sinful man, if the sinful man, also, stands there, that is, by faith. God's act is always an act that engages man and has meaning only if man lets himself be engaged, or be touched. God's act in Christ

is that he gives man a new “standing” and thereby creates for him a new situation. In the cross of Christ, God says to man: “There is where you ought to be. Jesus, my Son, hangs there in your stead; his tragedy is the tragedy of your life. You are the rebel who should be hanged on the gallows. But, lo, I suffer instead of you and because of you, because I love you in spite of what you are. My love for you is so great that I meet you there with my love, there on the cross. I cannot meet you anywhere else. You must meet me there, by identifying yourself with the one on the cross. It is by this identification that I, God, can meet you, man, in him, saying to you what I say to him: ‘My beloved son.’”

The cross of Christ on Golgotha is a historic fact just as truly as the murder of Julius Caesar in Rome. But the murder of Caesar has no importance for us. We do not meet God there; much less do we meet there the love of God by which he loves us in spite of ourselves. What makes *this* historical fact all-important is that God meets us at the cross and nowhere else. If it is really true that there we meet God, in his incredible love for us in spite of what we are – and faith knows that this is so – then this fact is of unique importance. It means that God, mystery in himself, has removed the veil and revealed his heart to man, has changed man’s condition entirely, from that of a godless rebel to that of a beloved son.

The historian would say: Yes, the crucifixion of Jesus is a unique fact; it took place then and there