

The Disappointment of the Cross

“And He began to teach them, that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders. And Peter took Him and began to rebuke Him. But He rebuked Peter, and said, Get thee behind Me, Satan” (Mark 8:31–33).

The time had come for a new departure between Jesus and His disciples. He must introduce them to the cross. They had found the Messiah in Him; but they could not have kept Him as the Messiah without going on to the crucified. They would have ceased to honour Him as Messiah had they not been carried on to Him as Redeemer. The soul’s absolute king must be its priest. If the life of Christ do not lead on to the cross of Christ, it will not continue to hold the place it did as a life. If Christ the ideal do not become Christ the Saviour, He will not remain the ideal. He comes down to be the victim of more or less delusion about Himself. And certainly He will not be able to do for experience what would keep up love and honour for Him as ideal. Admiration, if just to itself, passes into worship. He will not remain the hero unless He is the king.

Jesus did not begin by teaching His disciples about the cross. I am not sure that it was much in His own thought at first. But when it was, He led them on gradually. He did not even begin about His Messiahship. He began about the kingdom, and He slipped Himself into the kingdom in such a way that they could never think of it except as gathering round Him. Was that not equivalent to thinking of Him as King? Such was the meaning of Peter’s great confession. It was the sudden crystallising of a conviction, that had

long been growing both in him and in the rest, that in their Master they had the Christ. For this recognition Christ had been working and waiting. It was a discovery, but it was, like the greatest discovery always, inspiration. It was the flash of a train long laid.

But the time had now come when they must be carried even beyond that if they were not to fall back. And how did Christ take this next step? He lifted them above the mere idea of a king by shattering it. He took the great step by apparently destroying everything. He broke the old pitcher to show the light of the world. He fell upon their ideas of progress and hopes of prosperity with a flash which withered them. He threw His disciples into a bewilderment they had never felt before amid all their wonder at His mysterious ways. Since the great confession they had had no conception of anything but a career of swift and boundless popularity. How could a Messiah hold back longer, and how could He be anything but popular with Israel? It was the one thing Israel waited for. He would be acclaimed by the people and fêted by the authorities as the Man of ages and of God. They would hasten to place their services, their offices, their allegiance, their religious influence at His entire disposal. This was to be the most popular hero that ever appeared in Jerusalem. The disciples were in the best of spirits—so glad they had clung to Him, so glad they had seen through His humble position, delighted with His delighted recognition of Peter's bold faith. Would the Messiah Himself not be equally bold? Already they saw Jerusalem, Israel, Rome, the world at His feet. And no words can express the shock to them when He said that He must be refused by the country and its grandees, even be persecuted by them yea, die at their hands. The royalists would be His regicides. Why, if He had gone on to say that He would be deserted by themselves, it would have made no difference to their mood. They were stunned and stupefied already. They would not have understood it. They were so benumbed at His words that their faculties would have refused to work and take it in.

You have seen all the sequel of the cross, and you are surprised at their stupidity. But put yourselves in a parallel position. You are prosperous, let us say, and going on to prosper. It is due to your industry, your knowledge of your business, your integrity, your good character, and it has all been supported and consecrated in a way by your religion. You have been a good, useful, and re-

spected member of some Church, and you have held the doctrines the Church generally held. Your family has grown up about you and done you no discredit. You expect to go on to the end, and die, as an honest and respectable man should, in the faith which has satisfied your fathers and fellows for long. You have always said that with honest and Christian principles a man is sure to attain to public respect and a comfortable, it not a striking, degree of business success. But suppose, now, that your fortune was embarked in something which could only be saved from ruin by an act which would not stand the finer light. Suppose it were in some concern which you came to perceive could only be kept going by widespread ruin to a great number of innocent people. Or suppose that a voice came to you, as no divine voice ever came to you before, and convinced you (rightly or wrongly) that you could not please God without selling almost all you had for the poor that that concern had made. Suppose it came to you, as it has come to some, that you could not be true to Christ without taking a certain step that would ruin your reputation; or that for Christ's sake you must be silent, though your silence cost your reputation. Suppose these demands were made on you in what claimed to be the name of Christ. I will go farther. Suppose a preacher, in the height of his popularity, had laid upon him a message which left his conscience no alternative but to give it, though it was likely to cost him half his kingdom, weaken his influence with the public, and make his friends look cold on him and distrust him henceforward. Suppose any such case where the will of God came home to a man as an utter reversal of all that he promised and was expected to be or do. The disciples were in a position like that.

I should like (as I have named it) to enlarge the illustration of the preacher, and make it fit the situation of the disciples still more closely. Christ was a preacher, and at first a popular one. I suppose again a most gifted and eloquent young preacher; and he comes newly to a town and a church. The congregation and its managers are delighted. They look for such a time of prosperity as the place has never yet seen. Strangers are swarming into sittings. Never was heard such sweet, poetic, lucid, winning discourse. It was full of charm and light. It had not a tragic note in it. It was just a little above the ordinary way of thinking—enough to interest and instruct, and not enough to bewilder. It gave the maximum

of pleasure with the least demand or strain on attention. He had plenty of energy and a pleasant way with him. The children loved him, the press followed him, no meeting was complete without him. He inaugurated several forms of active work. Never had the love of God been made to seem so lovely—such an accession and extension to the love of home, of poetry, of our neighbour.

But there comes to him (it matters not at present how) a new revelation of the love of God in the cross of Christ. It comes upon him in quite a new light. His song had been of mercy, now it was of mercy and judgment. In the cross of Christ he saw the judgment of God. The desperate wickedness of his heart comes home to him, the exceeding sinfulness of sin. In the word of Christ he found quite as much about judgment as about kindness. He would go looking for a text in the Gospels to enable him to preach loving-kindness and tender mercy and gentleness and the childlike mind; and one after another the solemn utterances of the Lord would offer themselves to his eye, and the gentle gracious words would hide themselves away. He had led his people in simple green pastures, watered with much quoted poetry, as if the terror of the Lord existed no more, and the deep agonies, doubts, penitences, abysses, horrors of the soul had no existence outside the stage and problem novels; as if his decent congregation were a fair sample of the world. The *Weltsch-mertz*¹ had never drawn blood from him. The real note of sacrifice, of suffering, of sin, of blood, had never sounded either to him or from him. It had been all altruism and no tragedy, all sacrifice and no curse. The severity of the divine holiness had never come home to him, and he had never sent it home. He had never realised, as he did now, that though Christ came for love, He died for holiness. It was not His love but His holiness that made Him hated and slain. If we owe all to His death, it is to His holiness we owe it even more than to His love—if the two could be severed. But now it had come home to him, and the new tone made itself felt beyond him. People went away more puzzled than comforted, somewhat annoyed at being disturbed, disappointed to miss the quotations and find the commandments, angry to have their snug world upset and their peace troubled. He had much to say on self-scrutiny of the searching sort, of sin still mingled in a

1. ["World-pain."]

perilous way with sanctity, of resisting unto blood, of the righteous being scarcely saved, of the most laborious being unprofitable servants, of the gospel release being just as much a gospel demand, of comfort as a spiritual narcotic, and piety in some popular forms as blunting the edge of conscience and stifling the voice of justice. He reasoned of sin, righteousness, and judgment; of such conviction as the work of the Spirit. He asked himself and others how the cross could ever be really popular; how numbers of people in a prosperous, cultured, humane age could ever be brought to rejoice in the very judgments of God, and find comfort in them as part of the cross; how the shattering, humiliating message of the cross to human nature and human pride could ever be welcome but to a few; how its shock to the general self-complacency could be anything but resented by most; how they could stand its trituration of that conscience which told them they were honest, worthy, respectable, good and kindly people.

The love of God came home to him as a new and deeper revelation in this vein of grace. And those who heard him and hung on him were bewildered. They wondered if he had committed some secret sin which lay on his conscience, and was making his position a hypocrisy. They were not enamoured of this disquieting discourse. It took the sunshine, the happiness, the gay domesticity out of life. They complained that such Sundays were no Sundays now: that they brought concern instead of rest, that they did not return to business refreshed, but with new care. Sittings became more easy to procure on the floor of the church (the gallery did not show the effect so much). The offertory began to fall from summer heat to temperate. Some pleasant tennis families withdrew, and the golf people moved near a better links across the town, as their young people were not interested. He began to feel less than his old brisk faith in the human heart as a stay and security. "Appeal to the heart," he used to say to the lay-preachers. "Hold close to the great human affections and interests. Take hold of people where they are tender, and use the love of men as your point of attachment for the love of God. Systems will fail you and theologies leave men unmoved, but the human heart you can always rely on." Alas! he began to have misgivings about that stand-by. He had had some glimpses of his own heart that shook him, and did anything but stay him. He began to realise that Christ did more

for men by breaking them than by developing them; that “What must I do to be saved?” was a more hopeful frame, as a first inquiry, than “How can I develop my character?” or even “What can I do for Christ?” He was reading one day the life of a great saint recently dead, and he came on a letter which referred to a famous preacher of the popular sort thus: “If he should waken up to the perception of a God of absolute love, his popularity will probably vanish, and he will have a terrible conflict with himself, perhaps a period of unutterable darkness and unbelief.” These words came home to him—not that he was in darkness or unbelief, but that he had seen a light in the cross that was as the terrible crystal, a love that was a breaking hammer and condemning, consuming fire. Love had spoken a holier word than the mere heart could hear, and had revealed itself in the cross to conscience. He had seen men eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, full of comfort, zest, and affection, and a flood descending to sweep them all away. And he had seen this flood stayed by the cross of Christ alone; while the hearty and the affectionate, even within the church, were for the most part ignorant of what they escaped, and to what they owed the security of their lives and loves.

Meanwhile his deacons, his inner disciples, shared the general bewilderment with special concern. They were good, devoted men, and they were overjoyed with the prosperity and promise of the church. They were happy in the paragraphs of the religious press, and some of them had begun to think this was he who should save Israel and give their communion a new lease of life. And they were responsible for the financial conduct of the church, and for the new obligations that had been or were to be incurred. Some of them had grown up all their lives under a system of pleasant sermons with a poetic garnish, whose ideal was a domestic piety, not too troubled with the human aches, and the world woe, and the soul’s cry. It was an education which the new minister had promised to finish on more social lines. But it had really lulled the spiritual sense and closed the eye to more vital, searching, commanding truth. They did not know what to do. They thought the change was due to the minister’s reading too much theology. They hinted once or twice that what a successful minister needed was an acquaintance with life and not theology, that an active ministry was a much more effective thing than a studious one. The

man who said that had a son a rising journalist in London, who had opined in an article that if ministers would sell their commentaries and buy good novels they would turn their pulpits to better account. They would understand the heart in a way impossible to writers or preachers in the first century. And one of them, in his perplexity and disappointment, took the minister aside in a kindly way and warned him that he was on wrong lines. He said that that kind of old, strained, and hectic religion was very well for devotees and those who had not much to do with the world directly, but it was useless for their work with the new world. It was fatal to the prospects of the church, and to their various organisations, which could not be worked without the money that was leaking away. He pointed out that the only hope for the cause of Christ was in the Churches, and if they became feeble, if people were repelled, the kingdom of God must be indefinitely delayed. He was deeply attached to his minister, and he deplored the effect of this extravagant mood upon his future. And what a star of the Church would go out when that public career was quenched, and he subsided into ministering to a little church and living in a little house! He advised him, while not yielding of course to the spirit of the age, to make more use of it, and speak its language, and not go so far beyond its intelligence and its pet ideals. So Peter took him aside—kind, devoted, shallow man—and began to rebuke him.

I am not going to pursue the parable further. And it would be foolish to say that a full church is not compatible with a faithful gospel. There are cases enough to the contrary. It is only a possible and imaginary case, which I use as a modern translation in small type, of the situation between Jesus and His disciples when He told them what the Christian really meant when he took the cross in earnest. What I wish to leave on your mind is not the fable but the thing it would convey, the mind of Christ. There is no doubt that but for the cross Jesus would have been the most popular and effective prophet that ever rose in Israel. But for the cross Israel, through Him, might have been one of the great powers in modern history—greater than Islam, which is the Semitic civilization with Christ cut out. Jesus might have made Mohammed unnecessary, and given far humaner, subtler, and more commanding empire than Mohammed's to the world, at least to the East, if it had not been for the cross. Do you think He did not know that? Do you

think He did not see what the empire that *He* could found without the cross might do for the kingdom of God in the world? And did it never occur to Him as a possibility that the cross might hinder that kingdom, or nip it in the bud? Was it never suggested to Him that His cross might prevent God's throne, which a forward policy would establish on the earth? Had He no misgivings about His inward policy? What else was His temptation? Are there not plenty of men, good men and lovers of justice, to day who are honestly of the opinion that if the British Empire could be made for all the world what it is for India, the kingdom of God would be here or near? And a British Empire, as Lord Lawrence might have understood it, or General Gordon, would probably do very much in that way. And yet none of these men were what Jesus was in natural power and kingly faculty.

Do you think He did not realise what He might do in this direction, and what an obstacle and fatality to it all the cross must be? What else than this feeling made His temptation. It was His distraction between cross and empire—empire of course as a means of blessing and not a field of ambition. (His very temptation to sin was of good, like the subtlest in His Church.) It was between these two that He had to choose; and the conflict was so awful that when a voice like Peter's, freshly endeared to Him by the great confession, spoke for empire again, it was like to stir to life all the dreadful strife with Satan who had departed for a season. Do you wonder that Jesus turned in agitation on Peter, and heard in him for the moment the Satan He had disabled but not killed? He did not, of course, allude to Peter's character, but to the position which Peter took for the moment to His conflict and work. He did not say Peter was offensive, but that he was an offence, a stumbling-block, a peril in His path. His very love of Peter made Peter a Satan, a tempter, to Him—as your dearest might be to you, or your ideal, or your success.

There was a danger for Jesus in the remonstrance of Peter which did not lie in the solitary temptation of the desert. It came to Him from one He loved, one of His own. It came pressing on Him what He must make them suffer. It was not His own suffering that moved Him so much, as His sure sense of the suffering He must bring upon those who believed in Him and loved Him. It was unmerited suffering that He bore and that He should cause.

Much of the cross of Christ was His sympathy with those of His own whom He dared not spare, as the suffering Father spared not Himself. None can be more serious agents of temptation than those in whom our heart is bound up. How many a man has sold his conscience for his family, has changed his Church to please his wife, has lost his spiritual ardour in the ease and affection of his home. And is anything harder than to have to go on and do the right thing in the face of remonstrances from those who are deeply and genuinely concerned for our comfort or our reputation; on whom our course will lay new burdens; who are sedulous or ambitious for us; and who are not thinking of themselves at all any more than we are, but of us, and even of our cause?

No prosperity of home, business, State or Church is serving our souls well if it dull our faith in the Man of Sorrows and His sin-made cross. You may view Jesus as the gentle, noble, just, and benignant man, the flower of righteousness and mercy, the incarnation of stately charm and loving goodness. Yet you have to enter—you have not yet entered—the holy of holies. You cannot take Him without His cross, nor without His cross as the crown and key of all. Your soul's king must be its priest. You cannot take Him for all He is till you have taken Him in despair to find Him an endless hope. You do not know what is in Him till you have lost hope of everything and everybody, and chiefly of yourself, and found Him come when all had gone, and come where none can come, and take what none could lift from you, and give you the life that all the world seemed to be stealing from you. You do not measure Christ duly till you find that you have committed moral suicide, from which you are saved by His atoning self-sacrifice alone. Nothing but loss brings home the cross. It is lost men that find the true Christ. Nothing brings out the power and genius of the cross like having all the world against it. "Night it must be ere this lone star shall beam." It is not itself till it is opposed to a world in arms. It is not truly your salvation till it has delivered you from the onset of all the world both in your soul and on your soul. They best know the cross who have been fortified by it against a world all devils o'er, and drawn by it from the lowest hell. God makes His great saints out of great sinners. The offence of the cross is not ceased. Nothing hates it like human nature. It is still and always a stumbling-block to the happy natural man, to the man who is good

only because he was born good and likes being good. The cross is still a shock to the natural instincts and the ordinary expectations of respectability and prosperity, culture and common kindness. I do not say you must for its sake surrender such things. But the cross has a higher law, another standard. And *when the call comes*, that is the law you must obey. And that is the real and final standard by which you must measure life. The cross is the real measure of life. You either stumble over it to spiritual death or you rise on it into newness of life. And if you are not called to bear it in its extreme form yourself, you must be ready with your chief sympathy for those who do, and your whole faith for Him who did. When there are none to bear the offence of the cross, there will be none to save us from the piety of the world, and none to hallow and uphold our ideal of a King. It is a moral revolution when you have learned to love the shame of the cross, and dread somewhat the ease and comforts of life.

Now return to the comfort, interest, and affection of life, to its love and its laughter, as I shall do forthwith; but do it with a new sense of the terms on which you have them and the price they cost, both Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Eternity itself is moved for the coming of our simplest joys, and all the kindness of life is kept in place by the stern and crushing mercy of the cross of Christ.