

Introduction

THE CRUCIALITY OF THE CROSS

For the Christian faith questions about God - who he is and what he is like - are ultimately questions about Christ. But questions about Christ become immediately questions about his death and why it is that, according to the New Testament, his death should in some significant way affect God's relation to humanity and to the world.

The followers of Christ were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:26). By their being so called it was recognised that the gospel they preached was centred in him. Since it was common knowledge that Christ had been crucified any reference to him became a reference to him as the one who had been put to death in this terrible way. To speak of Christ at all was, then, to speak of the cross. So Paul simply declares: 'We preach Christ crucified' (1 Cor. 1:23).

The Church's Task

If, therefore, the task of the Church is to proclaim to the world the gospel of God it can only do so by focusing on Christ and his cross. For the gospel of God is one and the same with the gospel of Christ. On seven occasions, beginning with Romans 1:1, it is referred to as 'the gospel of God'; and on another 11, beginning with Mark 1:1, it is designated 'the gospel of Christ'. This conjunction of God and Christ in the gospel, without the least awareness of incongruity, must be read as declaring its origin and procurement as essentially divine. It is in Christ and him crucified that God the creator meets people as the God of their salvation and where individuals experience God through the exercise of saving faith. The deed of God in the Calvary event is, therefore, the place, way and sphere of God's redeeming action, liberating men and women from sin, death and the devil and bringing them into the glorious liberty of the sons of God. It is to Christ's 'sacrifice of atonement' that we owe our whole being as Christians. In the emphatic words of P.T. Forsyth, 'Faith in Christ, in the positive Christian sense, means much more than a relation to God to which Christ supremely helps us. It is a communion not *through*, but only *in* Christ and him crucified.'¹

However, on the plane of human history, the circumstantial happenings of the Calvary event were darkly characteristic of people's natural reaction

to the presence among them of a life of challenging goodness which confronts evil in a way which goes far beyond the limits commonly considered acceptable. Crucifixion was a quite common practice in our Lord's day. There must have been many occasions when a gibbet was set up at Golgotha; and there, between two convicted criminals, Jesus too was crucified one Friday at noon. The Gospels state the fact of his death quite baldly. They make no attempt to garnish the cross with flowers. They do not try to soften its awful reality. Nothing could be more ignominious, more humiliating, more repellent, than a death like this. To 'the natural man' (1 Cor. 2:14, AV) it seems sheer foolishness to believe that anything of eternal moment was transacted at a place where criminals died by one who himself suffered a criminal's death. To such it seems inconceivable that there could be anything divinely and spiritually significant in the death of one hanged on a tree.

From the very first days of the Church until now there have been many who want a Christianity without the cross. They cannot take a gospel centred on one who was crucified as a common criminal. For George Bernard Shaw 'Christianity is not cross-tianity' and Sir Oliver Lodge ventured to suggest that, 'In my opinion Christians make too much of the death of Christ.' The offence of the cross, the sheer scandal of it, has not ceased. For those who believe that their science and philosophy explain the world without the need of the 'God hypothesis' the gospel of the cross is the ultimate absurdity. Others, who retain some belief in a spiritual dimension to human existence, view Christianity as just one more manifestation of mankind's persistent search for meaning to life. They see the Christian faith as but one religion among other world religions. They may even, as a kind of sop to committed Christians, be prepared to allow that it is the best of the bunch in view of the quality of the life and teaching of its founder.

Apostolic Interpreters

This is not how Christ's apostolic interpreters understood the Christian faith. For them it was focused on Christ and specifically on *Christ* as the one *crucified*. For them the gospel was not a rational theory devised by the humanitarily inclined for whom its teaching of self-sacrifice for the good of others seemed an inspiring ideal. Nor did they see it as designed to supply the religious instincts of people, by the medium of a priestly ritual, with the means to regulate social relationships. For these first exponents of the Christian faith, who were mostly disciples of Jesus before his crucifixion and thus were in the best position to know his mind, his coming was 'to save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21).

That the idea that such a death as he died was for the accomplishing of God's saving purpose could have been spun out of their imaginations is unthinkable. They were Jews who knew that anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse (cf Deut. 21:23). It was by divine revelation that Peter confessed on their behalf that Jesus was 'the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). Later he was to declare that he 'bore our sins in his own body on the tree' (1 Pet. 2:24). For Peter this was the good news that he preached (1 Pet. 1:25).

For Paul, too, the gospel of the cross, of the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for him (Gal. 2:20), was not received from man. It came as 'a revelation of Jesus Christ' (Gal. 1:12). The cross as standing for the death of Christ was for the Church's first preachers and writers the crux of Christianity. It was at the very heart of the message they declared. And it was so because they were fully persuaded that in the action of the Calvary event God had disclosed his saving purpose to humanity. In the deed of the cross the action of God united with the act of Christ on our behalf and for our sake. The act of Christ was not merely a reflection of, or a substitute for, the act of God. Rather 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in the person of his crucified Son' (2 Cor. 5:19). What God alone could do to bring us back to himself Christ did. The New Testament is emphatic that it is in the atoning sacrifice of the cross that God's salvation comes to humanity.

The gospel of the Calvary event contains the reality of the redemption from the sin which separates man from God. Only in this revelation of redemption is God known as the God of the Bible. As the redemptive purpose of God under the old covenant came to be embodied in written scripture, so now in the dispensation of the new covenant is it enshrined in the far richer and more glorious disclosure of the New Testament. We are bound to scripture for, as Calvin argues,

since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.²

The biblical revelation thus centres on the Christ of the cross and the cross of Christ as its essential content. It is through the biblical revelation that God's redemptive act is brought home to faith, for Christ's death is more than a historical happening. For God, who acted in time and yet transcends time, is ever present for man's salvation in the divine action of the cross. The work of Christ thus presently experienced lifts God's reconciling act at Calvary above the realm of the historical, whilst it is itself firmly anchored in history.

The cross of Golgatha is the site of our redemption and the message of Christ crucified is both the heart of the gospel and the focus of the whole of scripture. Accordingly this book is about the centrality and cruciality of the cross of Christ.

Notes

1. Forsyth, P.T., (1909) *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 6.
2. Calvin, J., *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. (1940) by Beveridge, Henry, London, James Clarke, i, 68.

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