

CHAPTER EIGHT

2. JESUS CRUCIFIED

(Catechism nn. 571-637)

The Last Supper and the Agony

We come now to contemplate Jesus in the final hours of his life. Jesus and his disciples gathered for what was to be their last meal together before his death. It was a Thursday evening, and the evening ‘before the festival of the Passover’(John 13:1). Luke has Jesus say: ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer’(Luke 22:15). Mark, Matthew and Luke record the special meaning Jesus gave to the bread and wine they shared that evening. Jesus wanted his disciples whenever they gathered in the future to remember him and to see in the bread and wine sacraments which assured them of his continued presence among them. They were bewildered when Jesus told them that one of them would betray him (see Mark 14:18-21). Jesus also warned Peter that he would lose courage and deny all knowledge of Jesus (see Mark 14:29-31). John describes Jesus dressing as a slave and washing the disciples’ feet (see John 13:3-11).

After the supper Jesus ‘went with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden’(John 18:1), to Gethsemane on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. He asked the disciples to sit there, while ‘he took with him Peter and James and John and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death’ (Mark 14:32-34). ‘And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want’(Mark 14:36).

The text makes clear what it is that Jesus wants. Knowing the determination of the Jewish leadership to have him killed before the Passover, and knowing that Judas has gone off to betray him, he senses the danger he is in. He wants to live. The text does not make clear what it is that God wants. Too readily some have drawn a simple equation: Jesus does not want to die, but God wants Jesus to die, and Jesus submits to his Father’s will. A closer reading of Jesus’ prayer in the context of the whole Gospel leads us to another conclusion. All his life Jesus had longed only to do God’s will. God had given him a mission, a mission that seemed far from being successfully accomplished. The religious leaders on the whole had not changed. Many of Jesus’ compatriots were still consumed with hatred for their Roman oppressors. The ordinary people were still confused and caught between the security of listening to their religious leaders and the frightening freedom offered them by Jesus. Even the twelve were clearly not ready to be left alone.

For Jesus as for us, God transcends all aspects of human experience. Jesus knew the darkness of faith and the failure of all our human efforts to experience the divine or to conceive of God. Faced with human treachery and isolation, Jesus knew what it was to reach out to God and be greeted by silence. That the agony persisted is dramatised by the threefold prayer and return. In his distress, Jesus cried out, alone, to God that he might be spared this ‘hour’ of life and death struggle with evil. Underlying his prayer, however, was his complete willingness to do God’s will. Finally, it became clear to him that he must fall back to a simple solution. God had told him to love; he would keep loving in spite of the fact that it appeared that to do so would bring about the failure of his mission. God had told him to challenge injustice; he would continue to challenge it. God had told him to speak the truth about God and about the proper human response to God; he would continue to declare it.

Praying to God as his 'Abba', an intimacy that was special to Jesus. Jesus continued to trust that somehow, if he continued moment by moment to do the will of God, God would achieve through him all that God wanted to achieve, for he knew that for God 'all things are possible'. With the peace that comes only from total conformity to the mysterious will of God and total trust in spite of appearances, Jesus came back to his sleeping disciples and declared: 'It is over! The hour has come' (Mark 14:41).

Tragically, the idea that it was God's will for Jesus to be crucified continues to find supporters. If, however, Jesus' death could be described simply as God's will, we would have to say that those who condemned Jesus to death and those who crucified him were, though they did not realise it, carrying out God's will. To imagine that it was God and not sinful human beings who willed the murder of Jesus can only lead to a gross misunderstanding of the place of God in Jesus' life – a misunderstanding that it is hardly short of blasphemy. It was not God who crucified Jesus; it was the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, and the Roman prefect. God's part in what happened is seen in the resurrection (see the following chapter). This is clearly expressed in the early sermons that we find in Acts:

'This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.' (Acts 2:23-24. See also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10; 13:28-30)

The statement that Jesus was 'handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God', is not to be understood as a temporal statement, for God does not exist in time. Luke is telling us to look beyond sinful human activity to the design of God, for God can use even sin to bring about his will. Luke is telling us that in our thinking we should give priority to what God is doing. Our question here is: what is the will of God that is achieved through the crucifixion? What does it mean to say, on the one hand, that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus was the sinful responsibility of those who refused to obey God's will, and yet, on the other hand, that it all came within God's providential design and grace?

Whatever we mean by God's providential design, it cannot be such as to leave no room for human freedom. We are not automatons; we are not puppets of fate. We experience some freedom, however limited and conditioned. If so much human suffering results from our saying No to God's loving design, it is also true that wonderful good results from our saying Yes. Without freedom there would be no sin. Equally, without freedom, there would be no compassion, no generosity, no heroism, no love. Freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. God made us this way, and respects what God has made.

God is also constantly inspiring everyone to behave in loving ways. To the extent that we respond to God's inspiration, knowingly or unknowingly, we behave responsibly and God's will is done. To the extent that we reject God's inspiration, knowingly or unknowingly, we behave irresponsibly, and God's will is not done. Any particular decision is likely to be a mixture: we partly respond and partly hold back.

The crucifixion of Jesus would have to be defined as an unjust act. God does not will that innocent people be sentenced unjustly to death. Paul includes the murder of Jesus with the persecuting of the Christians as acts that 'displease God'(1Thessalonians 2:14-15).

The Sanhedrin and Pilate condemned Jesus to death precisely because they refused to listen to God; they refused to face the truth. Their action was sinful, and so, by definition, contrary to God's will. John has Jesus say as much: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word'(John 8:37). Stephen links the crucifying of Jesus with the persecution that was inflicted on the prophets. In behaving in this way, they were precisely 'opposing the Holy Spirit'(Acts 7:51). This point was made by Jesus himself:

'You are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors ... Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!'(Matthew 23:31-32,37; compare Acts 7:52).

God's attitude to sending his Son is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself in a parable which directly refers to his passion. It is about a man who planted a vineyard and kept hoping to enjoy its fruits. Everyone he sent to deal with the tenants was murdered or badly treated:

'He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard'(Mark 12:6-8).

God sent Jesus to 'give his life', in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper, and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners and prostitutes and outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by God. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen. When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they tracked him down to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do?

His mission looked like a failure. The religious authorities were not listening. There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew God wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

As sometimes happens to us, the sinful decisions of other people left him no room to manoeuvre. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out God's will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue to preach the good news of God's saving love, knowing that the religious authorities did not want the truth to be spoken. He determined to remain prayerful and forgiving and patient, and to continue to take the side of the poor who were crying to God for help.

When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was the way he died (see Mark 15:39). His death was brought about by others.

The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love, in forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to God's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design.

John sees Jesus' dying as his hour of glory. It is especially there that the Beloved Disciple could say: 'We saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of the gift of truth' (John 1:14). Truth [Greek: *aletheia*] is revealed when what is real is not forgotten [Greek: *lethe*], not hidden. Glory is a manifestation of truth that is so radiant and so beautiful that it arouses wonder and praise. This is Jesus' 'hour of glory', for in his dying he revealed God as forgiving, self-giving, love. Here we see 'the glory of God on the face of Jesus' (2Corinthians 4:6).

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father, and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God, no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all that God will vindicate us just as God vindicated Jesus. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us, we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you' (John 15:12).

However, his example would have had little power to persuade us had he not suffered. Suffering is part of the human condition, and Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him:

'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (Hebrews 5:7-9).

Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing. It is this which draws us to follow him. We needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy, and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life as we reacted to sin with more sin, till we lost all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, despite being faced with ultimate rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to 'look on the one whom [we] have pierced' (John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin.

His example, and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross, make it possible for us to give meaning to our sufferings by making an act of faith in God, and allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his. If, in our human way, we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over the city (Luke 19:41). This is God's reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of God's loving inspiration.

In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love, and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we follow the example of those who crucified Jesus and refuse to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal.

Through Jesus, it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the beloved disciple saw water and blood flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34), for the healing even of those who were crucifying him.

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity's rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but God did will the love-response; for it is God's love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God's providential plan, so that 'by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone' (Hebrews 2:9). As Jesus himself said:

'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

Herein lies the irony of the crucifixion. Contemplating him on the cross, we see him on the only throne that he knew on earth. If we look beyond the pain, and the sin that inflicted it on him, we see there, in 'the one we have pierced', the reign of God's love. On the cross we see the realisation of God's will in the making; for there we see love – love given unto death. There we see man made in the image of his Maker. There we see, in this sinful, broken world of ours, the power of fidelity. It is by contemplating him there that we experience the anointing perfume of God. It is from the cross that the reign of God's forgiving, healing, and redeeming love emanates. The Spirit of God's love 'anointed' him there, 'baptised' him there (see Luke 12:50).

When Jesus' early disciples searched the Older Testament in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God's love persisting through rejection. In this sense, his dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God's people.

Jesus' way of dying, and God's taking him into his embrace in the resurrection (see the following chapter), are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God's love-response to human disobedience. Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than as they really are. Sin, however, cannot change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope of realising Jesus' dream of God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

In the previous chapter we highlighted the fact that what most impressed Jesus' disciples about Jesus was the intimacy of his communion with God, and the constancy of his trust. John returns to this topic when he reflects on the meaning of the crucifixion for Jesus in his Last Supper Discourses (John 14-17) where he takes us to Jesus' heart and the intimacy of love that characterised Jesus relationships during his final suffering. John wants us to hear Jesus saying from the cross:

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also'(John 14:1-3).

'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you'(John 14:18-20).

'You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you'(John 16:22).

'I am not alone because the Father is with me'(John 16:32).

'Father, I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed'(John 17:5).

'Father, I am coming to you'(John 17:11).

'May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us'(John 17:21).

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them'(John 17:25-26).

Jesus' mission was to attract everyone to know God as love and to respond to God as he frees everyone from whatever it is that is holding us back from 'living to the full'(John 10:10). Jesus also promised that he would continue to draw everyone to himself and so share with us his own intimate communion with God. The disciples found the most convincing proof of Jesus and his mission was in the way he gave his life to his Father and to us from the cross.

He descended into hell ('Hades')

Jesus died and was buried. Like everyone before and since, the physical life he enjoyed on earth came to an end. He joined his dead ancestors in what the Jews called 'Sheol', and the Greeks 'Hades'. He died believing in God's love, and, as we will see in the following chapter, God drew him, as he had drawn people from the beginning of the human race, into a life-beyond-death, a life of communion with God, a life that transcends the kind of living we experience this side of death.

Jesus said once that when he was lifted up he would draw everyone to himself and so to God (John 12:32). This is at the heart of the Christian faith. Prior to Jesus, as we noted in the first of the preliminary observation in the previous chapter, there had always been those who had responded as best they were able to God's Spirit drawing them into divine communion (see John 1:12-13), for 'God wills everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of truth' (1 Timothy 2:4). It is thanks to Jesus that now everyone can see the way God's love plays out in our living and our dying, and how we are to respond. With Jesus' dying and being raised to life, everyone now can experience his Spirit inspiring us to share Jesus' life of communion with God. Thanks to Jesus we know that there is no darkness, no abyss, that we can experience where we are alone. Jesus shared every dimension of our human condition.

It is this truth that we 'celebrate' on Holy Saturday, that empty (and timeless) space between death and resurrection. 'He who descended is also he who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things' (Ephesians 4:10).