Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:

https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology

https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb

PayPal https://paypal.me/robbradshaw

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Christ of the Gospel.

No. III.—"CRUCIFIED ALSO FOR US UNDER PONTIUS PILATE."

IN M. Loisy's candid and tragic autobiographical work, entitled "Choses Passées," there is a passage of some note as revealing the extent to which, years before his break with the Church, he had driven the sharp wedge of distinction between truth as fact and truth as value into the historic Christian theology which emphasized the religious necessity of an immutable coincidence of the two. He says that he had come to accept no single article of the Creed according to its literal significance except "peut-être crucifixe sous Ponce Pilate."

Now whether the value of the Cross could continue while the fact of the Cross was represented by a "perhaps" is a question which, in one or two of its bearings, we may try to answer a little further on in this article. At the outset one word of reassurance may be addressed to any who, not for themselves but for others, dread the disturbing influence of the extreme scepticism represented by A. Drews, W. B. Smith, and J. M. Robertson, for whom the crucifixion of any such person as the Jesus of the Gospels has passed beyond the limits of all credibility. However clever and unsettling the literature which resolves historic Christianity as to its origins and the Person of its Founder into a species of widespread, if not universal, mythology may appear, it is essentially ephemeral because it is essentially not sane. It would need a succession of Smiths and Robertsons repeated in generation after generation to make the question of the existence of the historic Jesus a living question, a question which mankind as a whole would ponder over, seeking with anxious heart and aroused intelligence an answer. It is with such concentration of mind and soul that mankind does continually, though not always with equal intensity, confront the deepest and most real problems of religion. But the affirmation of the non-historicity of Jesus is the mark of an

esoteric cult, with which the common sense of mankind clashes as entirely and yet with as little belief in the possibility of such a cult extending or even maintaining its ground, as when some extravagant movement in æsthetics raises a storm of controversy which is destined to be stilled as suddenly as it arose, and to leave behind it no ripple to testify to its former violence.

When, therefore, we confess that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, we are standing on ground which we have a right to believe will prove firm.[1] The first chapter in Professor Loof's "What is the Truth about Jesus Christ?" may be recommended to those who are interested in the character of early non-Christian testimony to the existence of Christ. But the words "also for us" raise a different, and truly vital, issue. For in these words the fact is integrated into a whole religious and theological view of the world, and is made the subject of a particular valuation. The English word "also" is more forceful than the Greek τε, which is simply a connecting particle; yet the connection is of such a nature as to be in itself significant, for it is between an act so obviously transcendental in character as the Incarnation and making man of the Only Begotten Son of God, and an act which, at first sight, is a mere historical occurrence at a point in time. It is obvious why, if the birth of Jesus was in truth the Incarnation of the Son of God, belief in it should be made prominent in a Creed; it represents a completely new point of departure in the dealings of God with man; but, once granted the Incarnation, it is not immediately obvious why a particular event in the life, or rather the conclusion of the earthly life, of the Incarnate One, should be selected for special emphasis. One might have thought it a mere matter of course that if God were to become man He would submit to those experiences that condition human existence. Accordingly, the very fact of a connection being established between the Incarnation and the death of the Only Begotten leads us

[1] For a recent consideration of the testimony of non-Christian writers—Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus—see Loof's "What is the Truth about Jesus Christ?" Lecture I.

to expect a special valuation of the latter; and this is given in the words *ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν* "on our behalf" for us.

A distinction—though one should be careful not to press it over much—can be drawn between the *ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν* of this clause and the *δι' ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπος καὶ διὰ τὴν ἡμερέραν σωτηρίαν* with which the clause that asserts the Incarnation begins. Those words do indeed affirm a relationship between the Incarnation and human salvation, yet by way of intention rather than of immediate conjunction. That salvation is regarded as springing from results made possible by the Incarnation rather than as inherent in the Incarnation itself. But the crucifixion is spoken of as definitely endured for the advantage of men The distinction is clearer in the Greek than in the English. Thus one temporal and historical event is selected as charged with the peculiar power and man-ward purposes of God. If we may make use of a definition from the religious philosophy of Eucken to interpret the Creed, an historical occurrence is raised from the level of phenomenon to the level of fact. And if we conceive of different degrees of reality, then this is real in the highest degree.

So does the Creed answer by anticipation such a modern question as "Does faith need facts?" For if to a fact of history is ascribed a Divine potency, then without doubt faith can function truly only through response to, and dependence upon, such a fact. The attempt of certain Modernists to differentiate sharply between fact and faith is condemned by the union effected in the Creed between facts and values, with the implicit corollary that the abandonment of the facts would mean the abandonment of the values, or, at least, their complete unsettling. It is, of course, open to anyone to reply that we are in the early days of Modernist reconstruction, and that we have yet to see whether the philosophical principles underlying the work of Tyrrell, Le Roy, and Laberthonière, and of Loisy's earlier apologetic, are not capable of creating a new type of Christian belief and theology which shall move free from uncomfortable dependence upon the real or supposed

events of past history. In other words, a new Catholicism may fulfil the unredeemed promises of Ritschl's new Protestantism. It is possible; but if it would be obscurantism to say less, it would be credulity to say more.[1]

After all, the importance of the historical order involves the importance of the events which go to make up that order. The values of the present world-civilization have been prepared for and engendered by the facts of the past; facts, too, which are not merely the links in the chain of regular process, but facts of an abrupt and catastrophic character. Even as the great storm which swept over Borrowdale in November, 1898, nearly destroyed the hamlet of Seathwaite, and permanently altered the course of the River Derwent, so may the channel of historical tendency be changed by events which strike athwart and oppose the normal process of the generations amid which they emerge. This being so, there is nothing unreasonable in making a fact of history of decisive moment for religion. Once let it be allowed that God works through history—and the denial of this is possible only to a deism long since exploded or an atheism which saves itself from an enervating pessimism by means of an unwarrantable optimism—and there remains no legitimate philosophical objection to God's mark upon history, and for the sake of all future history being compressed into, though not exhausted in, an occurrence set in a particular environment of time and locality. And though one might not expect a metaphysician to accede to this consideration and argument, it still may not be wholly irrelevant to remember that for the great majority of men the historical order is far more real than any reconstruction of reality finely spun by the philosophical mind—and sometimes merely out of itself. Such a connection of fact with value as the ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν of the Creed enforces would indicate, among other things, a real condescension on the part of God to man in respect of

[1] Reference may be made to the criticism of Modernism in Professor Santayana's "Winds of Doctrine," especially the concluding pages of the essay.

his limited temporal existence; in which existence, however, because its limitations condition him at every point, he looks wistfully and anxiously for something that will assure him of the Divine care for himself and the Divine concern with the only reality that he is able to apprehend.

But granted the relevance of the historical for religion, there still remains the question as to the relevance of this particular historical event, the crucifixion of Jesus. We know how many sincere and devoted Christians, many to whom the doctrine of the Incarnation, of the coming into the world of Him Who is the true light that lighteneth every man coming into the world, is indeed such a "light as never was on sea and land," illumining their whole intellectual and spiritual horizon, yet find it difficult, almost impossible, to attach any peculiar significance to the event in which the self-abnegation of the Incarnation came to its close. And it is a mistake to under-rate, as some esteemed modern theologians are apt to do, the religious value of the Incarnation itself. Nevertheless, the Creed does not permit us to find the fulness of the Christian revelation in the Incarnation alone. Nor is the Cross simply the climax; rather is it a new fact, unique in its bearing upon man's good.

How this is so raises the whole problem of soteriology. And soteriology has never acquired a terminological orthodoxy equivalent to that which, whether viewed as guidance to follow or obstacle to overcome, appertains to Christology. Yet even in the brief statement of the Creed there are hints of which we can avail ourselves. It is not merely that He died, but that He was crucified. The manner of the death was, as far as we can see, irrelevant—an accident resulting from the laws of the time;[1] not so the fact that the death was inflicted by men, and not the consequence of the working of natural laws of gradual bodily decay.

Consider it in this way: there are three magnitudes of a special kind with which almost everyone feels, at one time or

[1] If this is true, then to lay stress on the amount of bodily suffering is to emphasize an accidental rather than essential element.

another, that he has an individual concern—God, sin, and death. And these magnitudes possess an inner connection between themselves, or, at least, man finds it so natural to connect one with the other that he cannot but believe that some link, as it were on the inside, hidden from him, keeps them ever in the same plane. So each magnitude can be defined or represented in terms of the other two. God is the magnitude condemning sin and the utter antithesis of death. Sin is the magnitude defying God and serving death. Death is the contrast to God (but can be regarded as the way to Him), the reward of sin (but also deliverance from those conditions under which sin is known to us). To the problem of these three magnitudes man, in so far as he is conscious of life as more than a succession of transient experiences, addresses himself. If sin and death combined are for him the negation of God, then, in all probability, he will go on to accept as ultimate the defeat, that is, the extinction, of life in the highest forms known to him—a defeat not simply in the physical sphere, for the passing of moral values from the world, with a static, non-moral universe as the outcome, could only be anticipated as a permanent impoverishment of existence by the obliteration of its highest order. On the other hand, the acceptance of God, that is, of a final principle of life and goodness, as the highest of all realities, does not immediately elucidate the whole problem of sin and death ; on the contrary, it renders inexplicable for many the fact of moral and physical evil, so that intellectual treatments irritate rather than help.

Now it would be going altogether too far to say that the crucifixion is in itself the solvent of these difficulties. In itself it can appear as the most tragic triumph of sin and death. It invites explanation. And it is useless to look for that explanation—at first, at any rate—in the Cross by itself. The Cross becomes luminous only through the Resurrection and the history of the Church. But in their light we begin to see and to experience the meaning of the Cross, and to understand why the death of Christ is specially mentioned in the Creed.

The Resurrection is the triumphant reversal of death. The Church is the one earthly community which professedly exists in continual reaction from moral evil, from sin. The ultimate subjection of sin is the ideal of the latter, just as the anticipatory, foregone subjection of death is the message of the former. Both message and ideal involve the presence of the power of God. The former would otherwise be incredible, the latter, at best, a pious hope. But message and ideal are also dependent upon the Cross; the former directly, the latter one stage removed. Yet, as we have no means whatever of portraying to ourselves the character of this unique community without, as preceding its foundation, the death of its Founder, since all the evidence that we have to handle brings the two into the closest possible relationship, we have a right to believe that there is more than an accidental connection between the facts that Christ died and that the Christian community sprang into vigorous existence, with constant and increasing backward glances thrown upon that death, in the same year.

The results of the crucifixion being so remarkable, it is entirely legitimate to regard the Cross itself as a fact deserving to be valued far more highly, far differently in kind from what would be the case had the death of Christ been but the normal termination of His earthly career. And we know how the various soteriological theories which have revealed varied strains of Christian thought on this subject have been conditioned by the sense of the imperative necessity for an adequate valuation of His death. With those theories, and with the problem of the choice between them, we are not immediately concerned. But what we desire to emphasize very strongly is that if the Catholic Christology and the doctrine of the Incarnation is true; if belief in the Resurrection is an affirmation of legitimate faith; if membership of the Church is more precious in the richness of the blessings that it brings than attachment to any other form of human organization, then the Cross which brings to so sharp and amazing an ending the Incarnate life, and is yet itself the preparation for the beginning of a new order, must be given

some special place in the Divine purposes, must be held capable of or to involve some interpretation which will show the necessity for so awful an event in the midst of God's gracious dealings with men.

We have spoken of the three magnitudes—God, sin, and death. In the Cross, as an isolated phenomenon, we see the subjection of the first magnitude, in the Person of the only Begotten Son to the third magnitude through the instrumentality of the second, or, looked at from another angle, to the second through the instrumentality of the third. The moment we pass beyond the phenomenal aspect we are conscious of subjection converted into victory. But a subjection of this kind is not at once explained and rendered natural by the triumph. Only if the Cross has a power and value of its own, though we must look beyond the Cross to realize the presence of such power and value, does the fact of the Cross cease to be the stumbling-block which so many have found it. And this reacts upon the doctrine of the Incarnation itself; for an Incarnation which involves the Cross becomes altogether less credible, if the Cross is treated as just an episode.

But if some worthy and sufficient purpose is contained in God's voluntary subjection of Himself, in the person of Christ, to death at the hands of sinners, then the Cross is no longer an unilluminated marvel but a revelation of the kind of God with Whom we have to deal, a God Who will share in the bitterest experience, short of actual sinning, which can ever befall man—the power of sin through death to cut short the work of the righteous. There is nothing which can seem to us so utterly tragic and senseless, nothing so provocative of cankering doubts or gloomy despair. Yet should it be so if this was God's method for the achievement of His ends?

In the Creed, where it speaks of the crucifixion, we are not told what it was that God designed to effect thereby, what could result by no other way save the way of the Cross. But we are told why God so acted; it was "on our behalf." Now it is a very curious thing that, whereas professors of what is called

Liberal Protestantism have had much to say of Christianity as teaching the noblest altruism, as urging that higher righteousness which is produced only through acceptance of the law of love, they have been ready to treat as just so much mythology doctrines which find a place for the supreme exercise of these ethical qualities—by God Himself. But the New Testament connects them specifically. "Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor"—that is the Incarnation; "Who loved me, and gave Himself for me"—that is the Cross. There is something radically wrong, profoundly and tragically blind, in a method which can overlook the patent and unparalleled moral implicates of a doctrine, and spend its attention on the elaboration of difficulties and oppositions whose effectiveness too often rests on a failure to remember the distinction between God and His ways, and man and his. That God Himself has done and endured what He bids men do and endure, this is the Catholic doctrine; and it is this which is needed if the ethical side of the Gospel is to possess that full power and control over men's consciences, that appeal to their hearts, without which the life has gone out of it.

Not "Are we to believe in God?" but "What kind of a God are we to believe in?" is the question that really troubles men. What is His power, what His will, what His love? The last above all. And, for whatever the fact may be worth, the Cross more than anything else in the world, more than any other fact, or doctrine, or argument, has convinced men of God's love. It is impossible to theorize about the Cross when the starting-point is the doctrine of the Incarnation, and not return always to this thought: There would have been no Cross, but for the love of God. Take any "explanation" of the Cross, anyone that may offend us at almost every point, anyone that seems beset by the gravest moral difficulties; nevertheless, the love of God cannot be wholly obscured; it still shines out as the cause of man not being left to perish, as that which secured in this way from all eternity the salvation of the elect. The great soteriological tradition which descends from Abelard has had most to say of the revelation of the love of God in the Cross,

but wherever there has been Christian devotion to the Crucified, wherever men have lifted up their eyes to Him as their Saviour, calling Him their Representative, Substitute, Sacrifice, or whatever name has seemed best to reveal the meaning of His presence for them in that bitter passion, there has been lit the spark to light men to the knowledge that God is love.

How the Cross reveals God as not only loving but holy, not only saving sinners but also repairing the moral havoc wrought through sin, and freeing life from the fast-bound burden of its own guilt, we are not told in the Creed. But the Cross would be less than it is in Christian experience if, as historic fact, it were not the earthly centre of the holy warfare which God, because He is holy, must wage against evil. That such an understanding of the Cross is grounded in the New Testament and not forced upon it is certain; yet that does not mean the absence of different angles from which the Cross may be viewed, both in the New Testament itself, and for us. And if we say that the "was crucified for us" of the Creed is reminiscent of St. Paul's "Christ died for our sins," we do justice to the emphasis of the words, without trying to read into them the details of any one theory.

The historian Tacitus, our earliest pagan witness to Christianity, knew nothing about Christ except that He was put to death. Christ, as a factor in history—and Tacitus saw, amazing as it appeared to him, that in some degree He was that —was a person Who had been killed. Is there not something divinely ironic in this fact, so contemptuously recorded by the Roman, being *the* fact in which, even while he was writing, the Christian Church gloried? And so, as human fact and Divine value, it received its place in the great Creed of the Church, bearing witness to Christianity as the religion which finds God in history, not directing its course from afar, but moulding it from within, and that not through inevitable immanence, but through sacrifice, suffering, and death for the fulfilment of His holy purposes and inspired by His love. J. K. MOZLEY.

[The fourth article in this series, "Rose again according to the Scriptures," will appear in the April issue of the CHURCHMAN, and will be contributed by the Rev. A. J. Tait, D.D.]