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The Evangelical Quarterly

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MEDITATION ON THE CROSS

As there is no limit to the love of God, so there never can be human words able to exhaust the wealth of meaning in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The Cross is God's love in action in a sinful world. We may feel and know its saving power in our own hearts, and read its meaning in the language of the Spirit, but even the Apostle Paul had to halt before its final mystery and confess the inadequacy of all metaphors to express the work of Christ, "who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption". There is a bankruptcy of the intellect, where the spirit comes into its own; where truth is incomprehensible unless it be received as revelation from God.

But though we cannot plumb the depth nor reach the height of the Love of God in Christ, yet we may take hold of the hem of His garment, and know that the whole is there, even though we cannot grasp it all. St. Paul, while he acknowledges the incompleteness of all his symbols by using them in the same sentence, does not refrain from employing each one in turn, that he may behold some aspect of the rich inheritance of salvation. The words themselves do not reveal—they prove nothing to him who seeks a merely rational basis for his faith—but they are as a link between the finite and the infinite.

The spirit must have a stem of thought whereon it may flower. The stem is the symbol or the metaphor. But when that has taken us as far as it may, it must halt, and the spirit goes on alone. The flower begins where the stem ends—one is not the other. The metaphor is not the experience. Yet it is the form in which the experience is able to become more than a mere subjective and incommunicable feeling. Others may take hold of the same stem and find the flower. The long years of Christian piety show to us how heart after heart has taken hold of the metaphors of redemption, taken from slavery or the law court by St. Paul, and found them sufficient, not to

express the whole power of the Cross, but to lead their minds to that point where the spirit finds itself able to take the leap of faith into the region of truths which surpass all knowledge.

So we cannot do more than approach the Cross, humbly, along some of the many roads which lead to its foot. There we must halt, and lift up our eyes to where He is. We are at the foot ; He is " high and lifted up " ; and between us is a space which cannot be spanned by us with words. He must come down to us with His own Word, and with the flame that will kindle our hearts. But if we may come to the foot of the Cross, we shall not fail to find Him there. And though words fail us, our hearts shall know His peace.

I

No longer can we escape the reality of sin. It presses upon us now not only as persons but as a world. It would appear to become not only a fact in the individual will, but almost a tangible entity weighing upon the whole of humanity, and threatening it with suffocation. That this is so is apparent from the increasing reference in high theological circles to " cosmic evil ", and to sin as a metaphysical fact. Such doctrine is in agreement with St. Paul and the Church Fathers. They did not minimise nor underestimate the power of the enemy. This meant more than a conflict in the will of each person. To the Apostle Paul, sin was cosmic but it was not metaphysical—it was personal. It was " he ", or " they "—" The Prince of the Power of the Air ", " Evil spirits in heavenly places ". Sin is serious because it is these powers making their combined attack upon the frail defences of mortal goodness—an unequal and foredoomed struggle. St. Paul had no illusions about the outcome of this battle in the lives of those who were not " in Christ ". Man has himself weighted the scales in favour of the enemy by his corrupt nature. He has traitors within the camp.

What if this be true, and Evil is not just the disobedience of each individual will against the righteous and loving will of God ? What if Evil is a person or persons in the spiritual realm, insinuating its way into our minds and influencing our wills against the Lord God ? There is much to commend this belief to our experience. We have realised that environment may be perfect, yet sin will spring up ; that heredity may give

nothing but good tendencies, and yet produce evil lives. The seed may be pure, the soil rich and free from weeds, yet some enemy cometh by night and soweth tares. There seems to be a personal, inimical agency that creeps in to take possession of the strongest and best-guarded will. The seventh chapter of Romans depicts the futility of all human safeguards. In spite of knowledge of the Law, and the best moral training of the age, some Other, which St. Paul calls Sin, entered and took possession of his will.

How, then, are we delivered from this body of death?—this evil that enters and possesses us? By coming under the jurisdiction of the Law of the Spirit—entering into a relationship with Christ which will make the believer free from the law of sin and death. By so doing, man actually changes the authority which is over his life, and he becomes one of those who are “in Christ”, bound by the love of Christ from which nothing can separate them, “not angels, nor principalities nor powers”.

But what has given Him this authority by sharing which we become more than conquerors? The Son of God has come and dwelt among men, and as man He has fought with the powers of evil and has conquered them on the human battlefield. They who have had undisputed possession of, and unbroken victory over the frail human will, have been dispossessed and routed in the will of the Son of Man.

If Evil be thus personal we must think of this victory in terms of persons. What effect would Christ's complete moral supremacy on the human plane have upon a person wholly evil? What confusion would it not cause in the ranks of those who have always won their battles against man! Now, confidence in their superiority over man is broken. And lost confidence is lost power. The power of sin is broken, through the victory of Christ, which undermines the self-confidence of the evil powers in the inevitability of their conquest over mankind. Formerly, man was either weighed down by his weakness in face of temptation, or else he deceived himself for a time with a false arrogance and self-assurance, which led to even deeper disillusionment and despair. He felt doomed to ultimate defeat, where even his will betrayed him, and he must needs confess, “the evil which I would not, that I do”. Does not man, as temptation assails him, feel his strength ebbing at the memory

of his countless previous failures? Even when he overcomes it for a time, he knows that again and again it will make its assault, until at last, inevitably, he will succumb.

But it is otherwise with those who follow Christ. There comes, with faith in Him, a vision of that eternal victory which broke for ever the *superior* power of evil, an assurance that Christ has done something *objective* to weaken the power of evil over those who know Him. That victory of Christ's puts the confidence of superiority in the heart of the believer. Christ is Victor; Evil is the less powerful, the vanquished who must carry on a guerrilla warfare in dark places, and in hearts which reject the Victor. But they who trust in Him know His conquering power, and when temptation whispers, they turn to Him through whom they are able to do all things. He who is Lord of their own life is able to give them victory because He is Lord over all things.

II

Jesus looked upon men as one family. He saw the hundred, not the ninety and nine. But even so He knew that the family was not complete, was not whole, and thus He identified Himself with men, in order that they and the Father might be one, and the family be restored to its fullness. To be brought thus into family relationship with the Father is indeed to be saved. None other than Christ Himself could accomplish this. Man can be saved only by God, but he can be saved only *as man*. He cannot go to God, so God comes to him, and becomes like him in all but sin. And in His Son God pays the price of man's reconciliation to the Father. God's love, in His Son's sacrifice, is the mighty bridge of reconciliation.

We cannot overestimate the effectiveness of unselfish love's agony. Many times it has cast a sheltering cloak around the loved one, and tempered the hot winds of temptation ere they reached the soul. True, Christ is the supreme Mediator, but men too may "share the crumbs broke at the feast". There is, in suffering love, as it were an anticipatory expiation of the sins of the loved one before they are committed. And the force of this suffering, all unbeknown, comes between the beloved and the besetting sin. One may say, "The young man still strays, even though his mother prays for him". Yes, but what would be his plight were she not to pray? That is what we can never measure. Love will not altogether fail in

its task when it takes upon itself suffering for another's sin. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

But although one may partly atone for another's sin, not all the prayers of the faithful can expiate a man's *sinfulness*. Underneath a man's separate sinful acts there lies a deeper problem—that tendency to welcome evil, to give it room, to identify oneself with it and take sides with it against what is good and clean, and later on to stand up and oppose God Himself. That is not sin but *sinfulness*. Its root lies not in the will but in the whole breadth of man's nature. It is through all. It intimidates the will, it feeds the imagination, it suborns the reason. In face of this, man is powerless, and love itself cannot save.

Is then the gap between sinful man and fullness of life unbridgeable? We have seen that God can fill it.

But sin is something on man's side, and whatever God may do solely from His side must seem mechanical, and as such must leave a residue of dissatisfaction in the penitent heart. Such an one feels that he has been given more than he deserves, and also that he has been given it without returning the utmost of his own—without the complete expression and outpouring of feeling and giving which is necessary before he can taste the full efficacy of God's gift of redemption.

Even when man gives his all he knows that God's gift is far greater. It is only when he is aware that there is an Other between him and God, who has helped to make his offering adequate, that he feels the peace of forgiveness stealing over him. It is then that the sense of inadequacy is erased by the uprush of praise and joy in the penitent's heart, and there follows a consciousness of release—of salvation.

In the Old Testament the insufficiency of mere repentance was felt. Man could not put himself right with God. He needed a symbol, a sacrifice—something in addition to the heart's turning to God. It was dimly sensed that there was need of a third element to bring man and God together. But so vaguely was this seen at first that the symbol represented more than the heart felt, and came to be thought of as sufficient in itself.

Thus came the prophets with their message of inner cleansing,—a grand, clear call to make oneself worthy of God's

forgiveness. How necessary was this prophetic challenge! And yet, too, how fraught with danger—that man might believe that he himself could bridge the distance between God and man!

Then came the day when deeper insight perceived that even rending one's heart rather than one's garment, and offering the broken spirit for the sin of one's soul did not adequately fill the deep chasm between the sinner and God. Some day, felt the seers of Israel, there will arise One in whose sacrifice, in whose giving, all men may feel their utmost repentance acceptable and their inadequacy completed,—a sacrifice which shall make atonement even for man's sinfulness. At that time their rejoicing will not be in themselves but in Him through whom they are able to feel acceptable to God. This Mediator will provide them with a gift great enough to offer to God. "The chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

At the heart of repentance there is not only the desire to show that one is ready to give all, to make redress for past sins, but also a deep anxiety that God's loss shall somehow be made good—that He shall receive back that of which He has been deprived. That is what Christ supplies. He gives "satisfaction" to God in that sense—by giving, as man, what is due from every man. But Christ also gives satisfaction to man in another sense—in that man feels that in Christ justice has been done to God, not because God demands it, but because the human heart, as well as holiness, demands it.

Those who know Christ know also this peace. It is not that they offer Christ to God each time they sin, but that they know, when linked to Christ by love and loyalty, that He is sufficient even in spite of their sinfulness. He atones, not as a substitute for repentance, but as the One through whom their repentance is made acceptable to God. In Him their little is made sufficient unto salvation. He is the Friend who takes them by the hand, and leads them into the Father's presence, where they know that all is well.

III

This sacrifice of Christ's can be fully realised only by those who have accepted His call, or who have been brought to grasp His hand when they were being overwhelmed by the agony of life's emptiness.

There is no text-book formula by knowing which all men may fit the work of Christ into their history of religion or philosophy. Love is known by its name, and no description can replace the experience for those who have not loved. Redemption by Christ is no more than an algebraic x to all but those whose hearts have leaped for joy under the experience.

There is no single way by which this happens. Nor must all conform to one type. Some men must go full circle, and know the uttermost deeps of sin; others find in Him the only Friend in a cold and lonely universe. None can say how near he has been to the point of utter loss, for no two are created alike. The good man may fall like lightning, while the bad man may deteriorate week by week, and month by month. Yet one thing we know—none can fall more quickly than Christ can fly to his aid.

But why do we speak in terms of space and time? It is not really that Christ flies on swift wings in pursuit of the falling sinner, but rather that He is already there, at every point on that road of deepening shadows.

Christ's death is history; but it is also the history of Eternity. It is the cosmic story of God's love. The Cross is not merely something that happened once; it is the eternal truth of God that *was once seen* by men on earth. The long road which Christ travelled to Jerusalem, through Gethsemane to Calvary, is the path of God's love in travail for redeemed men. Some are halted by the beauty of His holiness; others are conquered by His tears wept over Jerusalem; the tortured agony of Gethsemane overcomes the resistance of many, even of hardened sinners; the obedience unto death on the Cross has won to Christ a large multitude.

Can it be said, however, that the power of the Way of the Cross is exhausted in what is seen? No, for He goes yet further in His death. He carries there an invisible burden: He bears with Him the whole disobedience of man against God, the extreme sinfulness of wayward humanity at its farthest from God. "*My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" With this cry Jesus feels the punishment of sinfulness—not legal punishment, but that which sin exacts from man's soul. Upon the Cross, in His last agony and in His death, Christ goes down into the tragic depths where lies the man who is

bereft of God, into the desert of desolation, from which man has exiled God.

That is the point where a man shall know spiritual desolation. And he will cry out in that day, having refused to cry out till then. And the word he shall cry out will be the name of Him whom he has spurned and mocked. When that cry comes Christ will put forth His strong hand and say, "Lo, I am with you". For He Who has experienced that desolation of complete divorce from God, is able to succour those who dwell in that spiritual wilderness. Because He is without sin He is able to raise them up and restore them to God—for that holiness of His is the only road back from the pit of desolation. Man cannot find his way back—for it is the subtle treachery of sin to break all bridges as it crosses them. No other man can help him, for in this matter man is cut off from all except God. Each man treads his own road, and it is not interchangeable. Only Christ is able to lead man back, for His bridges are not broken.

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