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'A Ransom for Many.'

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'For verily the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many'—Mark x. 45.

THERE are few words in the Gospels more familiar than these. And yet our very familiarity with them may, if we are not on our guard, blind us to their full significance. This at least is certain, that they have been often misapplied and a meaning forced into them which they cannot bear. And it is only by noticing clearly the context in which they occur that we can hope to discover exactly what they meant upon the lips of Christ.

V.³² of the chapter marks, as no one can fail to observe, the beginning of a new period, what we may fairly call a crisis in the life of Jesus. His Galilean ministry was now practically at an end; and though for a time apparently it had been very successful, and great multitudes had followed Him, latterly it had been different; and no sooner had the people come to realize that He was not the kind of Messiah for whom they had been looking, than they went back from Him. Nor was this all; along with this desertion on the part of the people, there had now for some time been traces of a growing hostility towards Jesus on the part of the Jewish priests and leaders. And Jesus saw what from the first He had anticipated, and experience had made ever clearer, that there could be but one end to His mission. And it was therefore with the full consciousness of the death that awaited Him there, that He set His face towards Jerusalem.

We are not to suppose that this resolve was reached without an inward struggle. And there are few more graphic pictures in the Gospels than the verses in which St. Mark brings the Saviour before us pressing forward in prophetic elevation and sublimity of soul, and the awestruck disciples following timidly behind. Not yet could they understand what it all meant; and there was a mingled majesty and sorrow in our Lord's actions, which they dared not disturb. But He took pity on their ignorance; and they had not gone far upon the way when, joining Himself to them once more, Jesus foretold—it was now for the third time—the death with all its shameful accompani-

ments that awaited Him. No intimation could have been clearer; but still the disciples either could not or would not understand. So far indeed were they from doing so, that the sons of Zebedee actually chose this ill-timed moment for their selfish request that they might sit, the one on His right, the other on His left hand in His kingdom.

It was a request that might well have brought down on them the severest condemnation; but none such fell from the lips of Jesus. And it was rather with infinite patience that He sought to bring home to His erring disciples what their request really involved. To have any part in His kingdom, He pointed out, a man must be prepared not for outward glory, but for sharing in His cup of suffering, and being baptized in His baptism of blood. And then to make His meaning still clearer, Jesus gathered all His disciples together, and proceeded to show them how His kingdom differed from man's.

It differed first with regard to those who ruled. In man's kingdom it is the great ones who exercise authority,—those, that is, who obtain their lordship by means of conquest, or whose authority is based upon might. But in His kingdom the note of eminence is service; it is the servant of all who alone is great. And then corresponding to this difference in the rulers is the difference in the means by which their rule is established. The earthly ruler prevails by power. He uses the persons, the lives of others, to further his selfish ends and to minister to his will. But in Jesus' kingdom the man who will be great must consent not so much to use, as to be used. And in his efforts to further the good of those he desires to win and to save, he must be prepared to sacrifice his own interests, it may even be his own life.

Nor is this a solitary law, but a law which runs through all nature, all life, a law to which even He, the kingdom's Head and Lord, must bow. 'For'—so Jesus concludes, applying to Himself His favourite title, the title which, while

asserting His Messianic dignity, implies also His oneness with the men He came to save—*'the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.'*

Such, then, is the connexion in which the words occur, and whatever else is involved in them, they at least show that Jesus Himself regarded His mission as above all else a mission of service, and of service that was to culminate in His own death. And in so regarding it, does He not throw a new light upon the meaning of that death? I say, a new light; for it is a very significant fact that though before this Jesus had frequently referred to His death, sometimes in clear words, at other times in dark and mysterious allusions, hitherto He had spoken only of the fact itself, or of the manner in which it was to be brought about, and never of its inner meaning. But now for the first time we find Him helping us to enter at least a little into that meaning, and giving us a glimpse, a passing glimpse, it must be allowed, but still a very real one, into the how and the why He died.

1. For, first of all, this saying of Jesus brings His death before us very clearly, as a *voluntary* death.

Just before, He had been speaking of it from a different point of view as caused by the malice and wickedness of men (vv.^{33, 34}). And to that outwardly no doubt it was due. Jesus died as a martyr at the hands of the rulers of the Jews. But that was only one aspect of His death. Perhaps the most astonishing thing about it, as Dante has remarked,¹ is that in one and the same death both God and the Jews rejoiced. And when we think of Jesus' death from the divine side, it is its freewill character that at once impresses us. He might have escaped it if He would. *'Thinkest thou,'* so He asked in the very moment of betrayal, *'that I cannot beseech My Father, and He shall even now send Me more than twelve legions of angels?'* (Mt 26⁵³). But no! brushing the very thought of escape aside, He went forward calmly to the Cross.

And He did so because that was the very object for which He came. *'The Son of man came'*—came from a position of previous power and glory, came taking upon Him the form of a servant—*'to*

give'—with all the freedom involved in the very thought of giving—*'His life a ransom for many.'*

It may seem hardly necessary to recall this, it is so self-obvious a truth, were it not that rightly understood it cuts at the root of a very common popular misconception regarding the Atonement. For is there not still a tendency in some quarters to think of Christ's death as a sacrifice wrung from Him, if not an unwilling at least a passive sufferer? But here He shows us Himself an active willing agent in it all. His offering was a voluntary offering. His life was His own life to give or not, as He pleased. And it was not the death of Christ in itself, but the will and the love lying behind the death, that made it acceptable in the sight of God. As He Himself has told us: *'Therefore doth the Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I may take it again. No one taketh it away from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again'* (Jn 10^{17, 18}).

2. But Jesus has more to tell us about His death than that. He tells us that He gave Himself a *ransom* for many.

The figure seems at first sight a very simple one; but all who have taken the least interest in the progress of theological thought, know to what strange uses it has sometimes been put.

Thus in the early Church there were many who thought of this ransom as a price paid to the devil. By sin, so they argued, man had fallen into the hands of the devil, and was by him held captive. The devil could not therefore be expected to free man, unless he received some equivalent in exchange. And the blood of Christ proved to be such an equivalent. Sometimes the theory was presented under even grosser forms, as if a certain amount of deception or trickery had been practised on the devil, on the principle that in war all is fair. But the underlying idea was always the same—that the devil required and was entitled to a ransom for the liberation of man, and that this ransom Christ paid to him.

We are not likely to fall into such an error now; but we must equally guard against the even more insidious view, which regards the ransom as paid to God. All sin, we are told, is of the nature of debt due to God. God cannot forgive sin, that is to say, forgive the debt due to His honour, without first of all receiving a payment in full. And such a payment the death of Christ, bearing our sin in

¹ Però d'un atto uscir cose diverse;
chè a Dio ed ai Giudei piacque una morte.

Paradiso, vii. 46, 47.

its exact burden and measure, could alone provide. We see the glimmerings of truth underlying such a theory in the emphasis laid upon God's justice and man's responsibility. But how reconcile it in the hard material form in which it is thus presented, with the free unconditional love of God in which we have been taught that our salvation begins? It was because '*God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son.*' The love came before the giving; and not only after the sacrifice was complete.

The fact is, that these and all such theories err in pressing the figure of *ransom* too far. Christ says nothing here of the person to whom the ransom is paid, or of any exact equivalence in the payment. And we are more likely to arrive at His meaning if, observing the same studious reserve, we think of '*ransom*' simply in its general wide sense as *the means of redemption, deliverance, freedom*. Jesus thinks of man as enslaved to the dark powers of sin and of death, and He teaches that by His death man has been set free from the slavery in which he is held. As to the exact method by which this is accomplished, we are here told nothing.

3. But—and here is our third and last truth—we cannot do full justice to the very idea of '*ransom*,' still less to the idea of '*ransom for*,' or, as the original undoubtedly implies, '*ransom instead of many*,' without recognizing that in some—what to us must always be mysterious—way Jesus represents Himself as securing our deliverance by Himself taking our place. It is because He—the representative Head of our Humanity—served and suffered to the uttermost for us that man is free.

It is hardly possible, indeed, not to believe that here, as on so many other occasions, Jesus was thinking of the great prophecy of the Servant of the Lord in the second half of Isaiah, and finding its fulfilment in Himself: '*By His knowledge shall My righteous Servant justify many: and He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong; because He*

poured out His soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors: yet He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors' (Is 53^{11, 12}). Only we must not think that Jesus, because He speaks of *many*, is pointing only to a limited atonement. The *many* do not stand in opposition to *all*: but to the *One* by whom the atonement is effected. On the one side stand the *many*, of whom no one '*can by any means redeem his brother, or give to God a ransom for him*' (Ps 49⁷). On the other stands the *One*, perfect God and perfect man, pre-eminent in what in Himself He is, and so able to do what no one else can do, and to '*give His life a ransom for many.*'

It is vain to try to hide the difficulties which thus inevitably gather round the thought of the Cross of Christ—the Holy suffering for the unholy, the Just for the unjust. But so much at least is clear, that we cannot think of the death of Christ in the light in which it is here presented to us as the supreme example of service and self-sacrifice without understanding something of the irresistible sway which it has always exercised over the hearts of men.

How much more is involved in Christ's words, whether we have not in them at least the elements of that sacrificial and propitiatory character which all the Apostolic writers agree in ascribing to His death, is a question of immense interest and importance, but it is one on which we cannot enter just now. And we must be content with again simply affirming what in our own consciousness we are so well able to verify, that it is just when we are most conscious of sin's degrading and enslaving power, or are most nearly confronted with the sad realities of suffering and death, that we find in the thought of the Cross of Christ a peace and a strength that we can find nowhere else, and enter most fully into the meaning of the great words: '*For it became Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings*' (He 2¹⁰).