

18. The Meaning of Jesus' Death

While I haven't done any writing over the past three weeks, all this time the subject I had chosen for this essay has been uppermost in my mind and I have been mulling it over constantly. The title is exactly the same as that of a recent monograph by Barry D. Smith which I read a month ago and which has as its subtitle: *Reviewing the New Testament's Interpretations*. The author therefore draws not only on Jesus' own understanding of his death as we encounter it in the four canonical Gospels but also, and even more, the meaning which emerged and took shape in the faith in the risen Lord as it emerged and took shape in the minds of Jesus' followers.

My own strong preference is to draw above all on Jesus' own words and actions for I am convinced now, more than ever before in my life, that these must be the wellspring of my own faith. I do not entirely set aside Saint Paul whose letters to the newly established Christian communities were destined to play a monumental role in shaping the faith of future generations and, more than any other writings coming out of the early Christian movement, to lay the foundations for the theology of the future Church. However, what Saint Paul says must always be judged in the light of what Jesus himself said and did. I give primacy to the three so-called synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of John has rightly been called an interpretive Gospel and was probably composed much later than the other three. Its author may have known these, but his overriding concern was to reach for and to articulate a deeper meaning of Jesus' life, death, and rise from the dead, in short, as is made already abundantly clear in the majestic eulogy of the Logos (Word) in the very first chapter, to unveil, as it were, the innermost mystery of the revelation of God in Jesus the Christ.

I wish to raise two important initial points about my understanding of Mark, generally considered the earliest of the gospels. I have some difficulty with the conventional rather late dating of the synoptic gospels, shortly after the year 70 for Mark, and a decade or so later from Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of Mark may very well have been written at about the same time as Paul's earliest letters, that is, in the late 40's or early 50's. The objection that it must have been written after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in the year 70, because this calamity is foretold by Jesus in Mark so that, therefore, the prophecy is—thus goes the argument—*post ex eventu*, that is, a prophecy, or rather a quasi-prophecy, made after the event has already taken place, does not hold with me. Rather, I myself would argue that, on the basis of his own clear-eyed assessment of the already explosive political situation which prevailed in Roman-occupied Judea during the years of his ministry, Jesus was quite capable of making a prediction of the dire fate which awaited Jerusalem and its great temple.

Second point: the very abrupt ending of Mark is very puzzling; the two different endings supplied in some manuscripts are obviously later additions composed for the purpose of providing the Gospel with a meaningful closure. I like to think—it is only speculation, of course—that the author was unable to finish his Gospel—his death perhaps intervening?—but that his intent was to record an appearance of the risen

Jesus to the women who had fled from the empty tomb, frightened and unable to take in the message which the angel there had given them.

We are told in the gospels that at some point during his ministry of teaching and healing Jesus became aware that he would be sentenced like a common criminal to a cruel and ignominious death, and that this was indeed the will of his God with whom he had a uniquely close relationship, an intimacy so close that he did not hesitate to address God with the familiar Abba, “Father,” “Dad.” At the core of his message was the Kingdom of God (or Heaven), in which the Jewish people and, ultimately, all of humanity would live and work in perfect obedience to God's supreme Law of Love: love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbour as yourself. That Kingdom is not laid away in a distant future but, as Jesus took care to insist, is already “among you,” for it takes in all “those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,” as one of the sayings in his Sermon on the Mount has it. It is certainly not for the religious elite and the self-righteous unless they repent of their pride and arrogance. The call of the Kingdom goes out especially to “the lost sheep,” those who live on the edge of society, those who are not of the chosen Jewish people, and all those whose lives incur not a little scandal and contempt. It was not a message that would not resonate with the Pharisees, who were the religious rigorists, nor with the upper-class Sadducees, who were much lighter on religious conviction but dominated the priestly class and as collaborators with the Roman occupier were the powerbrokers of Judea.

As his ministry progressed Jesus became increasingly conscious of his absolutely unique relationship with God and with the Jewish people, although—and this is a remarkable sign of psychological realism and fidelity to the truth on the part of the synoptic gospels—at the beginning he was very reluctant to share this self-knowledge even with his disciples, let alone the general public. Over time, though, his disciples and many others began to see him as the Anointed of God (in Hebrew, the *Mashiach*; in Greek, the *Christos*) who might even be hailed as the Son of God, although, according to the synoptic gospels, he did not speak of himself as such until he was interrogated by the chief priests on the eve of his crucifixion. The title of “Anointed,” which in the Hebrew scriptures, namely in Isaiah, chapter 45, is actually bestowed by God on King Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire, who had let the exiled Jewish communities return to their homeland, was probably interpreted by some of Jesus' followers that he would drive out the hated Romans, but this is not what Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount who had proclaimed the supremacy of the Law of Love was all about. Even so, the Jewish authorities thought they had reason to be concerned about a mass uprising which would be crushed by the Romans with such overwhelming force and finality that it would lead to the extinction of Judea as a distinctly Jewish nation.

The Gospel of John is generally credited by scholars—except those of fundamentalist conviction—with much less historical factuality than the synoptic gospels. However, it records one telling detail which explains more than anything why the priestly establishment in Jerusalem finally decided to do away with Jesus via the Roman authorities: in chapters 11 and 18 of the Gospel of John, the high priest Caiaphas advises his fellow priests that it is better that one man should die rather than

the entire nation. I suspect that both he and his colleagues had been rattled by Jesus' eviction of the merchants—the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial pigeons—from the great Court of the Gentiles which fronted the Temple. We know from extra-biblical sources that the Roman governor was a harsh enforcer of Roman domination: what might happen next if the Jewish authorities responsible for maintaining law and order did not resort to decisive action?

Jesus' conviction and sentence to death by the priestly authorities was a charade. Jesus' saying before the assembled priests that he was the Messiah and the Son of God who would soon be vindicated by God, in particular his claim of being the Son of God, was in their eyes the worst possible blasphemy deserving of death. However, only Pilate, the Roman procurator, had the power to issue a sentence of death and to ensure its being carried out. He would not be in the least bit interested in what he would surely regard an issue or quarrel that had to do only with the Jewish religion. However, if Jesus' claim of being the Messianic Son of God was understood as being a claim of being the King of the Jews, that would be high treason and insurrection against Rome, a capital crime which, except for Roman citizens, was subject to the most cruel and ignominious possible mode of execution imaginable as decreed by Roman law, namely crucifixion. Jesus was brought before the Roman governor early in the morning, a convenient spot of time to ensure that the execution of the sentence could be carried as early as possible before the word got out to the general population. The crowd gathered in the forecourt of Pilate's residence and clamouring for Jesus' crucifixion consisted almost certainly of retainers to the aristocratic priestly households—many of them probably not even Jewish—who were simply commandeered to carry out their masters' wishes.

It was not uncommon for the condemned to suffer for a long time, even days, on the cross, but Jesus had passed away before the end of the day which is now called Good Friday. The best explanation for this is that the scourging he received before being led off to crucifixion must have been carried out with special brutality leading to a great loss of blood so that Jesus was already in a much weakened state when he was nailed to the cross. In this respect, I think, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* was almost certainly right, although, like many others, I found the movie distasteful for its obsession with and graphic depiction of Jesus' physical suffering. Far greater than the physical torture inflicted on him must have been Jesus' psychic suffering, which already begun in the Garden of Gethsemane, over the apparent triumph of evil: where was the Kingdom of God? Had his ministry of teaching and healing under the aegis of that Kingdom been in vain? It is not surprising, therefore, that according to Matthew, that at one point on the cross, when all of Golgotha had been plunged into darkness, he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" This is not mentioned in the other gospels, but I regard it as an absolutely authentic detail and not an authorial addition even though this exclamation is also found in one of Psalm 22.

Did this Jesus have some inkling during his ministry of the ultimate outcome of his death and suffering, namely his vindication by God who would raise him from the dead? The gospels suggest as much, although Jesus refers to it in highly cryptic and

symbolic terms, such as demolishing the Temple and then raising it again, which, of course, was completely misunderstood by his listeners. I am not dogmatic about the factual historicity about these sayings, but it is clear to me that Jesus' trust in the goodness of the God, whom he loved and addressed as Abba, was never fundamentally shaken despite moments of dread and despair, and it is above all my faith, too, that Jesus' being raised from the dead by God proved the absolute rightness of his all-encompassing trust in God. The Kingdom of God, therefore, as proclaimed by Jesus is not a pipe-dream, or to put to it more charitably, a beautiful illusion. All this, of course, is a question of faith, my faith included, even a leap of faith (to use Kierkegaard's phrase). But to put it into some psychological and historical perspective, it is impossible to conceive that an illusion of such magnitude could have sustained itself in the Jesus movement and eventually in the great diversity of churches over the years and the centuries.

The meaning of Jesus' death is therefore inseparable from his resurrection; this of course is an article of faith; otherwise, Jesus is only a martyr to a noble cause. It is most unfortunate, however, that in Christian thinking over the ages, the death and resurrection of Jesus have come to be viewed from a juridical perspective, which, in my judgment, amounts to a de facto denial of the reality of the Kingdom of God. This kind of reasoning—there is a kind of philosophico-theological method to it—was most forcefully articulated by St Anselm more than 900 years ago standing squarely in the Western Christian tradition; it plays fortunately little or no role in the Eastern Orthodox churches, as is well underlined by Barry Smith in the study I mentioned at the beginning. In Western Christianity God is viewed as a kind of all-supreme cosmic magistrate who has judged that humanity's sinfulness, as understood both individually and collectively, is such a severe affront to his sovereign righteousness that it must be punished with a penalty of a magnitude that no human person could possibly pay it; therefore, every person, man or woman, young or old, and indeed humanity as a whole, are doomed to everlasting separation from God, eternal damnation in other words. Only the Son of God, incarnate in the man Jesus, could pay the penalty, and thus God, in his infinite mercy, allowed it to happen: Jesus paid the full penalty through his self-sacrifice on the cross, and God vindicated Jesus' sacrifice through his raising of Jesus from the dead. Therefore, every person who accepts this mighty act of what came to be called in the Western Christian tradition “substitutionary atonement” is “justified,” that is, set right with God, and thus saved from everlasting perdition, and will be equipped over time, through the Holy Spirit-mediated process of sanctification, to receive the blessing of eternal communion with God.

As I see it, in the final analysis, what humanity needs to be saved from is not so much punishment by God as from the evil it is so sadly capable of. A human-created utopia cannot accomplish this; this is only realized, thanks to the Grace of God as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son Jesus, in and through the Kingdom of God. But men, women, and children, too, from every corner of the earth and every walk of life are called by God to be his co-workers in the perfecting of his Kingdom, and we are assured by Jesus himself that the final perfecting, his Second Coming, as it is called in the Greek Scriptures, when God will be “all in all,” as St Paul

puts it, lies indeed ahead for humanity. The Kingdom is not the preserve of any particular church, nation, or culture. Non-Christians, too, even agnostics and atheists, can be God's co-workers in this awesome process of the transformation of humanity. This, I know, sounds radical, especially to persons who consider themselves faithful members of a more or less traditional Christian church, but I constantly remind myself of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan and of the fact that God made the 'pagan' King of the Persians, his "Anointed."

For many years I have been very much indebted to two great Catholic theologians of the past sixty years or so, Hans K ung (especially in his *On Being a Christian*) and the late Edward Schillebeeckx (especially in his *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*) for impressing upon me the centrality of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching as recorded in the synoptic gospels. In the section entitled, "My Faith and Hope in Process," in my memoirs I rightly say that my struggle for a Christian faith that I could truly embrace and live by was far, far more arduous than of coming to terms with my sexual orientation—it has certainly been one that has lasted for most of my life, and I am still growing in the process. For many years the reality of the Kingdom of God has been also illuminated for me by the truly stupendous vision of a God-directed evolution for which not only the Christian churches but indeed all of humanity are indebted to the work of Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Jesuit priest, palaeo-anthropologist, and visionary (mentioned in the same section of my memoirs), silenced by his church in his later years but now widely recognized in the Roman Catholic communion as an outstanding thinker and mystic. These three men have shown me that Jesus the Christ is truly Immanuel, "God With Us."