

*'That they all may
be one'*



The Other Side of the Cross - faith vindicated – Samuel Rutherford

When our own particular portion of the Christian vineyard is devastated we grieve. It has ever been so in the Church. As Christians have persecuted each other and even done one another to death in the name of Christ, each beleaguered portion of the Church has known itself, as a part of the Body of Christ, to be bruised and broken. Christ is crucified afresh and believers weep for the Church. History shows us that this is true for every Church grouping which other Church bodies and political powers have sought to over-ride. There is no room for triumphalism here. Protestants and Catholics alike felt the same at the time of the Reformation. The Orthodox East has wept for itself. The common sense of outrage over the mutilations surely indicates an already existing though hidden organic oneness beneath our self-made divisions.

Samuel Rutherford (Scottish Presbyterian Minister - c1600-1660) grieved over his Church and people, who had become the victims of the rival Church polities of Episcopacy versus Presbyterianism. In part at least because of his sufferings (deprived as he was of his living at one stage and imprisoned) and of his pleading in prayer, the Scottish Church eventually won through to presbyterianism. Whichever polity we favour and so believe to be God's will for his Church, it cannot be denied that God remains the God for both sides. If we are ever to witness a visibly united Church within history we have to begin now to recognise our affinities, in Christ, despite the divisions. A Puritan, Samuel Rutherford could weep and plead as effectually for 'the Church' as did St. Catherine of Sienna before him in the 14th century Roman Catholic Church. The nineteenth century Russian Startzi (spiritual elders) pleaded for their Church before God and sought to upbuild her through the efficacy of their prayers and example on the brink of the great cataclysm that was to engulf her in the years ahead. The vocation to suffering because of a broken Church is indeed shared across all the demarcation lines we have

allowed to be drawn. We shall look here at some of the letters written by Samuel Rutherford during his imprisonment to illustrate our theme.

Writing to the Earl of Lothian in 1637 Rutherford recognises in him a fellow supporter in what he describes as *'the honourable cause of Christ and his afflicted Church and wronged truth in this land'*. Thus he can write freely to him of *'the falling and tottering tabernacle of Christ'* in their mother Church and goes on to say:

*Oh, blessed hand which shall wipe and dry the watery eyes of our weeping Lord Jesus,
now going mourning in sackcloth in His members, in His spouse, in His truth . . .*

Rutherford writes in a similar way during the same year to Robert Gordon of Knockbrecks: *'Oh, blessed were the tribes in this land to wipe my Lord Jesus' weeping face and to take the sackcloth off Christ's loins, and to put his kingly robes upon him'*. Christ weeps for Himself in the bruised and divided members of the Church, which is His very body, His Bride, and in return Rutherford pleads, in the same letter:

*Oh, that our Lord would make us to contend, and plead, and wrestle by prayers and
tears for our Husband's restoring of His forfeited heritage in Scotland.*

If Jesus weeps, wrestles and pleads so must His followers, by His enabling. He had said as much to Catherine of Siena three centuries before. Her blood, sweat and tears would move Christ to heal the wounds of His Spouse far more than any use of force or compulsion would ever achieve.

In the previous years of his imprisonment Rutherford had expressed similar thoughts in a letter to a certain Robert Cunningham in Ireland. There is the same notion of tears:

*My heart is woe indeed for my mother Church that hath played the harlot with many
lovers . . . The ways of our Zion mourn; her gold has become dim (Cf. Book of
Lamentations) . . . How shall not the children weep when the husband and mother
cannot agree!*

But there is also, in the same letter, a strong element of hope and constancy, coupled with a sense of self-offering so that God might the more readily heed his prayer. He goes on immediately to say:

Yet I believe Scotland's sky shall clear again; that Christ shall build again the old waste places of Jacob; that our dead, dry bones shall become one army of living men . . . My dear brother, let us help one another with our prayers, . . . Only let us be faithful to Him that can ride through hell and death upon a windlestrae (ie a wisp of straw) and His horse never stumble; and let Him make of me a bridge over a water, so that His high and holy Name may be glorified in me . . .

'A bridge over a water'. Again we are reminded of Catherine and her vision of Christ in His incarnation as the bridge between earth and heaven . . .

But yes indeed, our Lord will certainly accept our self-offering to Him for the sake of the Church. The very sufferings the Church has to endure will be used of God to this end. Rutherford says as much in the letter to the Earl of Lothian previously cited;

He needeth not service and help from men, but it pleaseth His wisdom to make the wants and losses, the sores and wounds, of His spouse a field and an office-house for the zeal of his servants to exercise themselves in. Therefore, my noble and dear Lord, go on, go on in the strength of the Lord against all opposition to side with wronged Christ . . .

Writing in the same year to Alexander Colville of Blair, Rutherford exclaims with greater assurance his belief that his sufferings for the Church are noted by God and will be used of Him, even though he can't yet see to the end or know how things will work out:

*I know that the violence done to me and His poor bereft bride is come up before the Lord; and suppose (ie presume) that I see not **THE OTHER SIDE OF MY CROSS**, or what my Lord will bring out of it, yet I believe that the vision shall not tarry, and that Christ is on His journey for my deliverance . . .*

In the darkness Rutherford believes, ie senses that his own destiny and that of the Church are tied up together. Like Catherine he can, in response, do nothing other than offer himself entirely to God for this purpose even if it should mean being deprived of his own salvation and cast into hell. In the letter to Robert Gordon quoted earlier, Rutherford speaks in very strong terms. He wishes to see, even now, a 'new sun like the light of seven days' (Cf. the Book of Revelation) 'shining upon (his) poor self, and the Church of Jews and Gentiles, and upon (his) withered

and sunburnt mother, the Church of Scotland, and upon her sister Churches, England and Ireland . . . all for the glory of God. It is not enough to pray for Scotland alone and he may even need to exclude himself if his prayer is to be heard:

It mattereth not, howbeit I were separate from Christ, and had a sense of ten thousand years' pain in hell, if this were so . . . oh, if the Almighty would take no less wage of me than my Heaven to have it done! (Ibid)

These are words of extravagant love and total self-offering to God that His will might be brought about. They are reminiscent not only of Catherine of Siena but also of St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans, where he says he could wish himself to be a castaway for the sake of his fellow Jews who did not know Christ. We might also be led to think of certain elements in the Orthodox tradition. Those with a specific vocation to prayer, in particular monks and nuns, are often drawn into intense spiritual conflict with the demons, the forces of evil from the lower regions. For instance the Russian Staretz Silouan (1866-1938), monk on Mount Athos, was led by the Holy Spirit and invited to '*keep his soul in hell and despair not*'. A tall order indeed and totally beyond the comprehension and experience of most of us, thank God - but perhaps not of Samuel Rutherford. The same Robert Gordon letter concludes with the following words:

*I think sanctification cannot be bought, it is above price. God be thanked for ever that Christ was a told-down price for sanctification. Let a sinner, if possible, lie in hell for ever if He make him truly holy, and let him lie there burning in love to God, rejoicing in the Holy Ghost, hanging upon Christ by **FAITH** and **HOPE** - that is Heaven in the heart and bottom of hell.*

Samuel Rutherford experienced not a little of 'hell upon earth' but he continued steadfast, holding on in faith even when faith and God Himself seemed to have deserted him. In the midst of his persecutions he **could not** see to the other side of his cross but he knew what he wanted there to be there - healing for the Church whatever the cost to himself. His faith was real, and was vindicated. Assuredly, as with his Master before him, '*God did not leave his soul in hell*' (Psalm 16;10). Now he tastes something of the reality of sanctification, together with multitudes from **all** the Churches no doubt. We are called to a like sanctity and a like self-offering in prayer and work for the sake of Christ's body the Church. (Colossians 1:24)

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