

This is truly victory in the midst of seeming conquest and it cannot leave us uninvolved. Identifying Christ and his love for us leads us inexorably on to identify *with* him. And so Traherne continues:

*Teach me, O Lord, these mysterious ascensions.  
By descending into Hell for the sake of others,  
let me ascend into the glory of the Highest  
Heavens. Let the fidelity and efficacy of my love  
appear, in all my care and suffering for Thee.*

Our Christian life, the very meaning of existence, is summed up here - the dying and rising of our baptism, our precarious journey through life from the cradle to the grave - all taken up into the redemptive work of Christ and given meaning and efficacy. The true 'story' is indeed shared-in and re-lived by each and every one of us. Jesus awaits our willing recognition and response - not in a momentary act of emotional enthusiasm but in a life-time of acceptance and total self-giving, the identification of love with **LOVE**.



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**IN CONQUEST VICTORY - Identifying  
Christ  
Thomas Traherne 3**

**L**ife is over-familiar. We can't recall a time when we were not around - obviously. Mercifully too we can't consciously recall the first moments of our earthly life, emerging from the womb and all the rest. If we could, life would seem even shorter than it is. For a brief space we are allowed the illusion that we have always been around in the world and indeed always will be. But it *is* illusion *and* brief, though we do all that we can to distance ourselves from the realism of things.

The Christian can likewise become over-familiar with his faith. We have heard the 'story' so often: creation, fall, incarnation, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, the Spirit's coming . . . We keep it at arm's length, not letting it impinge. The need of course is to make the connecting link, let the 'story' interpret life, become personally involved, changed, resurrected.

The 'story' is illustrated over and over again in scripture in a myriad different ways. Every single person's life on earth is likewise a living out of the 'story', through from conception to life beyond death. We need the constantly repeated telling of the tale to keep our bearings and to give us faith, courage and grace to come through. We can't actually survive without being really and truly 'in Christ', if we but knew it.

Poets and people of prayer can often enough help us to see what all this is getting at and to find a way-in by which we can share in and interpret for ourselves the universal experience we are describing. Life can then begin to make a little more sense. Thomas Traherne, a seventeenth century Church of England clergyman, and writer of great spiritual depth, is one such person. We shall look at No. 90 of the first of his *Centuries of Meditations* to illustrate our theme.

At this point in his *Meditations* Traherne has been considering Jesus crucified, dying on Calvary with the glory of his divinity seemingly totally eclipsed by the intensity of his human suffering. He sees how believers from every corner of the world have their eyes fixed on Jesus, united thus in the intensity of their grief and their love. But the eclipse of glory is only apparent. In very truth there was literal darkness over the earth when the Son of Man was lifted up. The physical sun hid its rays. But the darkness itself only served to reveal the unquenchable splendour of God-made-man dying to save the world:

*In these shades doth this sun break forth most  
oriently. In this death is His love painted in  
most lively colours.*

The utter abasement of Jesus fills us with amazement but surely not with disbelieving scorn. Yes, God does actually stoop to this. There were promises and prefigurations in Old Testament times and we can see Jesus already in them. But before, in fact, we can begin to grasp the meaning of Calvary we have to come to terms with the incredible mystery of the incarnation itself - God really and truly taking flesh, becoming a man without ceasing to be God, in order that we could begin to see something of what God is like and how amazing is his love.

Traherne begins the meditation we are considering with this very fact, God's self-revelation in the flesh, predicted too in the Old Testament and objectively realised in the utter self-abasement of the dying Body of Christ on the Cross. Just as Yahweh of old revealed himself in symbol to the Israelites in the pillar of fire and the cloud, so now the reality is here - not so much in the Spirit-like obscurity of the cloud as in the fiery pillar of Christ's Body reigning from the Tree and blazing

forth the glory of God's love for men in the darkened midday sky:

*This Body is not the cloud, but a pillar assumed  
to manifest his love unto us . . . God never  
showed himself more a God than when he  
appeared man; never gained more glory than  
when he lost all glory; was never more sensi-  
ble of our sad estate, than when he was be-  
reaved of all sense.*

Traherne knows himself to be actually there with Jesus in His humiliation and death, His sacrificial love for mankind. That is where we are too, each of us. ("Where I am, there will my servant be also". Jesus said. *John 12:26*). Thus Traherne, unable to restrain his desire for total identification with Jesus, exclaims:

*O let Thy goodness shine in me! I will love all,  
O Lord, by Thy grace assisting as Thou dost:  
And in death itself will I find life and IN CON-  
QUEST VICTORY.*

Knowing that in Christ God entered the body of our flesh, and that we in turn are with Christ where He is - in his dying as well as in his rising, in his very self - then with Traherne we too can be boldly sure of victory. Suffering and death are not the end - *not* the defeat of all the good God wills for us. No, nothing, not even death itself, can conquer us since we have victory in our Lord Jesus Christ. (*1 Corinthians 15:57; Romans 8* ).

Traherne turns again to the Old Testament. He recalls how even the seemingly invincible Samson was brought low, mocked, derided and cruelly tortured, but in his dying was his triumph (*Judges 16:23-31*). In this, Samson prefigures Christ:

*This Samson (ie Jesus) by dying killed all his  
enemies: and then carried the Gates of Hell  
and Death away, when being dead, Himself  
was borne to His grave.*