

THE GLORY OF THE CROSS

‘These words spoke to Jesus and lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, ‘Father the hour is come; glory thy Son that thy Son may also glorify Thee’ (John 17 v 1)

We must remember that these words and their subsequent interpretation were written years and years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Church had spread in all directions – suffering persecution and witnessing faithfully to Jesus. St John had had a life’s time medication on the happenings and he was writing them in the context of Christian history and expansion.

Jesus is seen in his famous discourse and the High Priestly prayer before the Last Supper and more particularly in the verse quoted:- ‘Father the hour is come; glorify thy Son that thy Son may also glorify Thee’ – as fully committing himself to the way of the Cross; he is accepting and welcoming it, indeed embracing it. His trust is in the father to whom his obedience is given. The Cross-towards, which he is moving, is the Glory of God because self-sacrifice is the expression of love. Yes, these words represent the true Glory of the Cross, and I think we can only begin to comprehend this glory if we meditate on why the Crucifixion had to happen, and also what it cost and still costs in Jesus’ living members.

People nowadays are confronted with suffering on an unprecedented scale through the mass media – and with distortion of human values, and they tend – if they have any notion of this to blame God for it or to discount him altogether because there seems to be no care or hope. How much suffering is man-made? How may suffer through acts of violence and unleashed fury? True there are natural disasters, natural suffering, and of course death, and these are

the norms of life. They are part of life – the full cycle from conception and birth until death. We have the early creation stories which attempt to show how sin, suffering, evil, death, entered the world; man initially created to love and serve the Lord overcome with the desire to be as God, to act God and thus opening the gate of evil. We do not have to look far to realise that there are two sides to everything – a good and a bad, a light and a dark – both in natural creation and in human.

You will be familiar with the history of the Israelites; their trials and tribulations and backslidings; of their leader Kings, prophets who tried to keep them on the right path. The sense of hopelessness – will they never learn? – yet coupled with this there is a strand which runs all the way through that all would be well; all would be very well if they would stop, repent, and begin again. Over and over again were they offered a new chance. The chance par excellence was the deliverance from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. This event is used in the liturgy for Good Friday with this refrain from the prophet Micah – he is putting these words into the mouth of God -, ‘O my people what have I done to you and how have I wearied you? Answer me’ – interposed between each verse. The Israelites are being reproached by God as it were for their infidelities. E.g. ‘I led you out of Egypt from slavery to freedom but you led you Saviour to the Cross’; ‘I gave you saving water from the rock but you gave me gall and vinegar to drink’; ‘for forty years I led you safely through the desert. I fed you with manna from heaven and brought you to a land of plenty but you led your Saviour to the Cross’ I led you on your way in a pillar of cloud but you led me to Pilate’s court.”

What about our nation’s history? Could it not re-echo with the theme? Our times are very like those we read about in the Bible. In fact, it appears that all the nations of the world reflect within themselves the sins of the Israelites. There are people who can read for us the sign of the times and do we heed? Well Jesus came into the world to put things right and offered himself up for us. It may seem extraordinary that the rulers of his

time should fear him his teaching – indeed, as there are nations and individuals who mock at the attempt to restrain or annihilate Jesus’ followers today. There is relentlessness about the events of Jesus’ life leading to his passion nothing seems to stop Jesus from marching to the Cross; a procession – like quality; a majesty about it, which we recognise in retrospect. But there was no glory apparent about the natural event – blood, tears, sweat, agony, pain; disillusionment and fear on the part of the apostles; the agony of mind for his Mother and St John. Think back to the original quotation “Jesus ... said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son that thy Son might glorify Thee’. No one saw any glory. It was the finish so far as they could see. St Paul wrote ‘Christ for our sakes become obedient unto death, even to death on the Cross’ (Phil.2)

Why did it have to happen? We dare not think what it would mean if it had not happened. Man, given free-will threw it away, and Jesus, of his free-will, shows us the way back. He conquered the ultimate evil. He went right through. He has done it to show us the way – Christ for our sake became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross; wherefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name.

All of us will die, all of us will suffer in some way – e.g. the suffering caused by anxiety for a loved one; growing old too. Fr Andrew in a Meditation for Every Day wrote, “It wants courage to grow old, to see other people suffer, to suffer oneself. To whom shall we go to keep us sane, brave, and patient. Slowly ... a shape becomes clear ... the outline of a hill ... on the hill are three crosses and on that central cross he hangs who made of suffering and sorrow a crown of royalty and a gospel of good news Go to him and consider how he died ... it seemed that the Father had forsaken him; he died outside his own church – judgment of the priests had been given against him; the ordinary people threw him over and the disciples denied, forsook and betrayed him. Yet today we believe in his resurrection. There is faith, it is not sight; it is adventure, it is confidence in spiritual values; it is the great big thing which can take

us everywhere. Let us go to the Lord of Calvary and pray to him that our faith fail not.”

The story of the Passion has become a triumphant procession with the cross aloft and carried before us:-

‘The royal banners forward go,
The cross shines forth in mystic glow,
Where he in flesh, our flesh who made
Our sentence bore, our ransom paid.’

Instead of being a symbol of shame, the cross has become a symbol of glory. Triumph and hope. ‘In this sign we conquer’ Shameful things happen today; men do shameful things to one another. Perhaps we see a gleam of hope as we review shame and suffering in the light of the Cross, upon which Jesus underwent a shameful trial and death to redeem us all – voluntarily:-

‘When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.’

Dr Leonard Wilson, the bishop of Birmingham who died in 1970 had been prisoner in the notorious Chiangi prison while he was bishop in Singapore. Another writing about him stated that never once did he experience fear, either before or during the ordeals he suffered, but he tried to compose himself beforehand, and meditate on the passion of Jesus. This is as it may be. Roy McKay writing his biography in ‘John Leonard Wilson, Confessor of the Faith’ has this to say, ‘Leonard never dwelt on the physical horror of the torture he suffered. When he referred to this time, it was to make clear that this experience has established for him once and for all the truth of the Christian faith he confessed. As the story of his earlier years unfolds, it will be seen that he did not always possess that quiet assurance of those who can say, “I am not ashamed for I know him whom I have believed.” After the experience of those years of

horror, pain and darkness, he knew that he had been upheld by God's love beyond the point of no return, and whatever doubts and difficulties, failures and disappointments later came his way, his spirit was never defeated for now he could say with great confidence, 'I know him whom I have believed'.

Leonard said the following about himself in a Sunday service of the BBC: "I remember Archbishop William Temple in one of his books writing that if you prayed for any particular virtue, whether it be patience or courage, or love, one of the answers God gives to you is an opportunity for exercising that virtue. After my first beating, I was almost afraid to pray for courage lest I should have another opportunity for exercising it, but my unspoken prayer was there, and without God's help I doubt whether I could have come through. Long hours of ignoble pain were a severe test. In the middle of that torture, they asked me if I still believed in God. When, by God's help, I said 'I do' they asked me why God did not save me, and by the help of the Holy Spirit, I said, "God does save me, He does not save me by freeing me from pain or punishment, but He saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it." When they asked me why I did not curse them, I told them that it was because I was a follower of Jesus Christ, who taught us that we are all brethren, I did not like to use the words, "Father forgive them" It seemed too blasphemous to use our Lord's words, but I felt them, and I said "Father, I know these men are doing their duty. Help them to see that I am innocent". When I muttered, "Forgive them" I wondered how far I was being dramatic, and if I really meant it, because I looked at their faces as they stood round and took it in turns to flog, and their faces were hard and cruel, and some of them were evidently enjoying their cruelty. But by the grace of God, I saw those men not as they were, but as they had been. Once they were little children playing with their brothers and sisters and happy in their parents' love, in those far off days before they had been conditioned by their false nationalistic ideals, and it is hard to hate little children, but even that was not enough. There came into my mind, as I lay on the table, the words of that Communion hymn:-

“Look Father, look on His anointed face
and only look on us as found in Him,
Look not on our misusing of Thy grace,
Our prayer so languid, and our faith so dim;
For lo between our sins and their reward
We set the Passion of Thy Son our Lord.”

And so I saw them, not as they were, not as they had been, but as they were capable of becoming, redeemed by the power of Christ and I knew it was only commonsense to say “Forgive”.

It is not Bishop Leonard Wilson whom we glorify, but somehow he had seen that something which lies behind and beyond life. Something of God’s indestructible beauty had been conveyed to him. “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but now is my kingdom not from hence” (John)
The Cross-and suffering – a sign of hope – foolishness to the worldly.

What about ourselves and the Cross? Some of you maybe familiar with ‘The Imitation of Christ’ by Thomas a Kempis. There is a section entitled “The Royal Way of the Holy Cross” all of it is worth quoting but I have chosen out only a portion.

“Why fearest thou to take up the Cross which leadeth thee to a Kingdom? In the Cross is salvation, in the Cross is life, in the Cross is protection from our enemies ... in the Cross joy of spirit ... There is no salvation of the soul, nor hope of everlasting life, but in the Cross ... Go where thou wilt, seek whatsoever thou wilt, thou shalt not find a higher way above, nor a safer way below than the way of the Holy Cross ... the Cross therefore is always ready and everywhere waits for thee...”

we have come full circle and we will return once more to attempt to gaze at the Cross as seen through the eyes of Jesus – in the light of the Resurrection and as interpreted by St John.

“Father the hour is come; glorify thy Son that thy Son may glorify thee; as thou hast given him power over all flesh that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is eternal life that they might know thee and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. I have glorified thee on earth; I have finished the work, which thou hast given me to do. And now O Father glorify me with thine own self, with the glory which I have had with thee before the world was.” (John 17 v 1 to 5)