

CALVARY AND EASTER

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

As we look at the events which played their part in bringing about the death of Jesus on the cross at Calvary perhaps the most characteristic feature is their naturalness. We understand the motives which prompted the leading characters because they are so like the sort of things we feel and do ourselves. For example, the chief priests were very human in their reactions to the prophet of Nazareth. They were frightened that he might be stirring up a revolution which would not be in the interests of their country or their own position. They were uneasy and felt baffled in the face of his popularity and so they schemed to retain their power. Certainly, they were willing to break the law but they did it all rather secretly and doubtless had you questioned them they did it for the best purposes. Do we not all know the temptations that power structures evoke.

Or take Judas Iscariot, he was so understandable. He was attracted by the opportunity of making a little money; it was a small sum after all, but that is all that our opportunities normally are. Just to make a little money on the side by less than honest methods. Overall, I suppose we could not regard him as a bad type; he had after all been a follower of Jesus and doubtless listened to what Jesus had to say with a good deal of appreciation; he followed Him to Jerusalem in spite of danger, and after his betrayal he was sorry for the consequences of his action, and his conscience now began to assert itself; but it was too late, he hadn't any real faith in God or understanding of his forgiveness, only remorse and so he did away with himself.

Then, too, there is Pilate; weakish but aren't we all? He was frightened of his reputation at Rome and doubtless he had every reason to fear the machinations place seekers were speaking against him in his absence. A very real danger for anyone who absents himself from the centre of power for an appreciable time, as any man of the world knows. So, although Pilate knew Jesus was innocent he let events take their course.

Lastly, there are the disciples; true friends of Jesus but at the time of crisis they thought of themselves instead of speaking up in the crowd. They ran away at the crisis point and when they rallied it was too late. Had they spoken up as members of the crowd and shouted the chief priests down and got the crowd on their side, there is no doubt that the crucifixion wouldn't have taken place. Pilate would have found strength and the chief priests would have been frightened. The disciples' reaction was thoughtless with regard to their own duty and opportunities, so that they failed through looking after their own skin first, till it was too late. It is all so familiar and so we could go on.

All the events were so natural, so understandable and yet they led (as selfish actions always do) to injustice and wrong-doing. It is all so hopeless is it not? The human race seems to be involved in a mess which it finds impossible to extricate itself from.

On the other hand, there are in the story of the crucifixion certain elements which are not natural, but un-natural, or rather supernatural. I mean the re-action of Jesus Himself. The apostle Peter notices the striking contrast of Jesus' behaviour with the sort of behaviour we would be expected to show. He wrote that when Jesus was reviled He did not revile back again and that when He suffered in an unjust way He did not threaten His persecutors with verbal attack which was the only means left to Him. Indeed the Gospel narratives show us that His thoughts were not on Himself at all. All the other characters in the drama were self-centred: the chief priests and their power, Judas and his money, Pilate and his position, the disciples and their own skin. But Jesus had no thoughts for Himself, but only for God and for other people. For example, He thought of His mother and made provision for her even while He was hanging from the cross. He had a word of encouragement and salvation for the thief who was dying next to Him, and for the soldiers crucifying

Him. He prayed "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do". Jesus' concern for others was plainly unaffected by His own intense and unjust suffering. This is supernatural. And His faith in God never wavered. It expressed itself in complete obedience. It was tested to the extreme limit, indeed God accepted His offering of obedience as the bearing of our sins, so that Jesus experienced in His soul that darkness of being forsaken by God; yet His faith in His Father never wavered so that at the last He was able to pray "Father, into Thy hands I commend My Spirit". Jesus accepted the events which overtook Him as the cup which His Father had given Him, and in willing obedience underwent what befell Him, knowing that God was the gracious dispenser of everything that was happening. It was the first time in the history of mankind that this sort of thing ever happened. It was the first time that a man had exercised complete and unwavering faith in God, tested in this case to the uttermost extreme imaginable. Jesus' faith was triumphant and expressed itself in complete obedience to God's will and in concern for others rather than for oneself. It was a complete victory over all that is sinful in our nature and in our environment.

It is not, therefore, surprising that Easter and the resurrection should follow; for death is the result of sin and sinlessness triumphs over death. Jesus' victory over Satan and sin accomplished at Calvary had been followed by His exaltation to the right hand of power, crowned as He is now with glory and honour. It was God who was at work in Christ, God the Creator and Father of His people was working out His gracious purposes of salvation. It was He who took our nature and dwelt with us. It was He who overcame, for Jesus was Emmanuel - God with us. God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself. What we could not do (being hopelessly

involved in our sinfulness) He has done for us, and these purposes of God which were so plainly at work in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus are still going on, and will reach their culmination when our Lord Jesus Christ comes and establishes His rule of righteousness and right behaviour everywhere. If we wish to share in that glorious future it can only be through our relationship to Jesus, through seeing Him as Lord and accepting Him as Lord of our life, and receiving the forgiveness of sins which He accomplished at Calvary and the reconciliation with our heavenly Father which forgiveness is.

The writer of John's Gospel draws attention to the fact that when our Lord died and the soldier pierced his side with his javelin there flowed out water and blood, so symbolising complete cleansing, for water was the symbol of purification in the Old Testament ritual and the blood of the Old Testament sacrifice, sprinkled on the altar covered sin. So from the death of Jesus flows complete cleansing, and if we receive this forgiveness through faith in Him we will share in His crown, in His glory and honour, for God will complete His purposes for men which were so plainly displayed when Christ triumphed over man's profound problem - selfishness and sinfulness. In John 3:16 we read "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life". It rests now with us to accept this forgiveness through acknowledging Jesus as our Saviour and Lord.

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is broadcast every Sunday at
7.05 p.m. over Radio. 2CH

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12/8/79

32/79