

The Incarnate Son, a Sufferer and Sacrifice

by John Henry Newman

*Cardinal Newman preached this sermon on Palm Sunday, 1 April 1836.
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“Being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.”¹

HE WHO THUS humbled Himself—being first made man, then dying, and that upon the shameful and agonizing Cross—was the same who from eternity had been “in the form of God,” and was “equal with God,” as the Apostle declares in a preceding verse. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God; the same was in the beginning with God”; thus speaks Saint John, a second witness to the same great and awful truth. And he, too, goes on to say, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” And at the close of his Gospel, as we know, he gives an account of our Lord’s death upon the Cross.

We are now approaching that most sacred day when we commemorate Christ’s passion and death. Let us try to fix our minds upon this great thought. Let us try, what is so very difficult, to put off other thoughts, to clear our minds of things transitory, temporal, and earthly, and to occupy them with the contemplation of the Eternal Priest and His one ever-enduring Sacrifice;—that Sacrifice which, though completed once for all on Calvary, yet ever abideth, and, in its power and its grace, is ever present among us, and is at all times gratefully and awfully to be commemorated, but now especially, when the time of year is come at which it was made. Let us look upon Him who was lifted up that He might draw us to Him; and, by being drawn one and all to Him, let us be drawn to each other, so that we may understand and feel that He has redeemed us one and all, and that, unless we love one another, we cannot really have love to Him who laid down His life for us.

¹Phil 2.8.

With the hope, then, of suggesting to you some serious thoughts for the week which begins with this day, I will make a few remarks, such as the text suggests, upon that dreadful yet most joyful event, the passion and death of our Lord.

And, first, it ought not to be necessary to say, though it may be necessary even because it is so obvious,—(for, what is very plain is sometimes taken for granted by those who know it, and hence is never heard by others at all)—this, I say, in the first place, must be ever remembered, that Christ's death was not a mere martyrdom. A martyr is one who dies for the Church, who is put to death for preaching and maintaining the truth. Christ, indeed, was put to death for preaching the Gospel; yet He was not a Martyr, but He was much more than a Martyr. Had He been a mere man, He would have been rightly called a Martyr, but as He was not a mere man, so He was not a mere Martyr. Man dies as a Martyr, but the Son of God dies as an Atoning Sacrifice.

Here then, as you see, we are at once introduced into a very mysterious subject, though one which concerns us most nearly. There was a virtue in His death, which there could be in no other, for He was God. *We*, indeed, could not have told beforehand what would follow from so high an event as God becoming incarnate and dying on the Cross; but that something extraordinary and high would issue from it, we might have been quite sure, though nothing had been told us. He would not have so humbled Himself for nought; He could not so humble Himself (if I may use the expression) without momentous consequences.

It would be well if we opened our minds to what is meant by the doctrine of the Son of God dying on the Cross for us. I do not say we shall ever be able to solve the mystery of it, but we may understand in what the Mystery consists; and that is what many men are deficient in. They have no clear views what the truth of the matter is; if they had, it would make them more serious than they are. Let it be understood, then, that the Almighty Son of God, who had been in the bosom of the Father from everlasting, became man; became man as truly as He was always God. He was God from God, as the Creed says; that is, as being the Son of the Father, He had all those infinite perfections from the Father which the Father had. He was of one substance with the Father, and was God, because the Father was God. He was truly God, but He became as truly man. He became man, yet so as not to cease in any respect being what He was before. He added a new nature to Himself, yet so intimately, that it was *as if* He had actually left His former self, which He did not. "The Word became flesh:" even this would seem mystery and marvel enough, but even this was not all; not only was He

“made man,” but, as the Creed goes on to state, He “was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried.”

Now here, I say, is a fresh mystery in the history of His humiliation, and the thought of it will cast a new and solemn light on the chapters we shall read during the week. I have said that, after His incarnation, man’s nature was as much and as truly Christ’s as His Divine attributes; Saint Paul even speaks of God “purchasing us with His own blood,” and of the “Lord of glory” being “killed,” expressions which, more than any other, show how absolutely and simply He had put on Him the nature of man. As the soul acts through the body as its instrument,—in a more perfect way, but as intimately, did the Eternal Word of God act through the manhood which He had taken. When He spoke, it was literally God speaking; when He suffered, it was God suffering. Not that the Divine Nature itself could suffer, any more than our soul can see or hear; but, as the soul sees and hears through the organs of the body, so God the Son suffered *in* that human nature which He had taken to Himself and made His own. And in that nature He did truly suffer; as truly as He framed the worlds through His Almighty power, so through His human nature did He suffer; for when He came on earth, His manhood became as truly and personally His, as His Almighty power had been from everlasting.

Think of this, all ye light-hearted, and consider whether with this thought you can read the last chapters of the four Gospels without fear and trembling.

For instance: “When He had thus spoken, one of the officers which stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, ‘Answerest Thou the high priest so?’” The words must be said, though I hardly dare say them,—that officer lifted up his hand against God the Son. This is not a figurative way of speaking, or a rhetorical form of words, or a harsh, extreme, and unadvisable statement; it is a literal and simple truth, it is a great Catholic doctrine.

Again: “Then they did spit in His face, and buffeted Him, and others smote Him with the palms of their hands.”

“The men that held Jesus mocked Him, and smote Him, and when they had blindfolded Him, they struck Him on the face, and asked Him, saying, Prophecy, who is it that smote Thee? and many other things blasphemously spake they against Him.”

“And Herod with his men of war set Him at nought, and mocked Him, and arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe, and sent Him again to Pilate.”

“Pilate therefore took Jesus and scourged Him; and the soldiers platted a crown of thorns, and put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand, and they put on Him a purple robe, and said, Hail, King of the Jews! and they

smote Him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon Him, and, bowing their knees, worshipped Him. Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.”

Lastly: “When they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him”²—between two malefactors, and even there they did not cease insulting and mocking Him; but all of them, chief priests and people, stood beholding, and bidding Him come down from the Cross.

Now I bid you consider that that Face, so ruthlessly smitten, was the Face of God Himself; the Brow bloody with the thorns, the sacred Body exposed to view and lacerated with the scourge, the Hands nailed to the Cross, and, afterwards, the Side pierced with the spear; it was the Blood, and the sacred Flesh, and the Hands, and the Temples, and the Side, and the Feet of God Himself, which the frenzied multitude then gazed upon. This is so fearful a thought, that when the mind first masters it, surely it will be difficult to think of any thing else; so that, while we think of it, we must pray God to temper it to us, and to give us strength to think of it rightly, lest it be too much for us.

Taking into account, then, that Almighty God Himself, God the Son, was the Sufferer, we shall understand better than we have hitherto the description given of Him by the Evangelists; we shall see the meaning of His general demeanour, His silence, and the words He used when He spoke, and Pilate’s awe at Him.

“And the high priest arose and said unto Him, ‘Answerest Thou nothing? What is it which these witness against Thee?’ But Jesus held His peace.”³

“When He was accused of the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto Him, ‘Hearest Thou not how many things they witness against Thee?’ and He answered him to never a word, insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.”⁴

“The Jews answered Him, ‘We have a law, and by our law He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God.’ When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he was the more afraid, and went again into the judgment hall, and saith unto Jesus, ‘Whence art Thou?’ But Jesus gave him no answer.”⁵

“And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see Him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by Him. Then he questioned with

²Jn 18.22; Matt 26.67; Lk 22.63-65; 23.11; Jn 19.1, 2; Matt 7.29; Mk 15.19; Lk 23.33.

³Matt 26.62, 63.

⁴Matt 26.12-14.

⁵Jn 19.7-9.

Him in many words, but He answered him nothing.”⁶

Lastly, His words to the women who followed Him,

“Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold the days are coming, in which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck. Then shall they begin to say to the mountains, Fall on us; and to the hills, Cover us.”⁷

After these passages, consider the words of the beloved disciple, in anticipation of His coming at the end of the world. “Behold He cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see Him, they also which pierced Him: and all the kindreds of the earth shall wail because of Him. Even so, Amen.”⁸

Yes, we shall all of us, for weal or for woe, one day see that holy Countenance which wicked men struck and dishonoured; we shall see those Hands that were nailed to the cross; that Side which was pierced. We shall see all this; and it will be the sight of the Living God.

This being the great mystery of Christ’s Cross and Passion, we might with reason suppose, as I have said, that some great thing would result from it. The sufferings and death of the Word Incarnate could not pass away like a dream; they could not be a mere martyrdom, or a mere display or figure of something else, they must have a virtue in them. This we might be sure of, though nothing had been told us about the result. But that result is also revealed: it is this—our reconciliation to God, the expiation of our sins, and our new creation in holiness.

We had need of a reconciliation, for by nature we are outcasts. From the time that Adam fell, all his children have been under a curse. “In Adam all die,” as Saint Paul says.⁹ So that every one of us is born into this world in a state of *death*; such is our natural life from our very first breath; we are children of wrath; conceived in sin; shapen in iniquity. We are under the bondage of an inborn element of evil, which thwarts and stifles whatever principles remain of truth and goodness in us, directly we attempt to act according to them. This is that “body of death” under which Saint Paul describes the natural man as groaning, and saying, “O wretched man, who shall deliver me?” Now for ourselves, my brethren, we know (praised be God) that all of us have from our infancy been taken out of this miserable heathen state by holy baptism, which is God’s appointed means of

⁶Lk 23.8, 9.

⁷Lk 23.28-30.

⁸Rev 1.7.

⁹1 Cor 15.22.

regeneration. Still it is not less our natural state; it is the state in which every one of us was born; it is the state in which every little child is, when brought to the font. Dear as he is to those who bring him thither, and innocent as he may look, there is, till he is baptized, an evil spirit in his heart, a spirit of evil lying hid, seen of God, unseen by man (as the serpent among the trees of Eden), an evil spirit which from the first is hateful to God, and at length will be his eternal ruin. That evil spirit is cast out by Holy Baptism, without the privilege of which his birth would but be a misery to him. But whence did Baptism gain its power? From that great event we are so soon to commemorate; the death of the Son of God incarnate. Almost all religions have their outward cleansings; they feel the need of man, though they cannot supply it. Even the Jewish system, though Divine, effected nothing here; its washings were but carnal; the blood of bulls and goats was but earthly and unprofitable. Even Saint John's baptism, our Lord's forerunner, had no inward propitiatory power. Christ was not yet crucified. But when that long-expected season came, when the Son of God had solemnly set Himself apart as a Victim in the presence of His twelve Apostles, and had gone into the garden, and before three of them had undergone His agony and bloody sweat, and then had been betrayed, buffeted, spit upon, scourged, and nailed to the cross, till He died, then He with His last breath said, "It is finished"; and from that time the virtue of the Highest went forth through His wounds and with His blood, for the pardon and regeneration of man; and hence it is that baptism has its power.

This is why He "humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." "Christ hath redeemed us," says the Apostle elsewhere, "from the curse of the Law, being made a curse for us." Again, he says that Christ has "made peace by the blood of His cross." He has "reconciled" us "in the body of His flesh through death, to present us holy and unblameable, and unreprieveable in His sight." Or, as Saint John says, the saints "have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." And no one speaks more explicitly on this great mystery than the prophet Isaiah, many hundred years before it was accomplished: "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."¹⁰

We believe, then, that when Christ suffered on the cross, our nature

¹⁰Gal 3.13; Col 1.20-22; Rev 7.14; Isa 53.4-6.

suffered in Him. Human nature, fallen and corrupt, was under the wrath of God, and it was impossible that it should be restored to His favour till it had expiated its sin by suffering. Why this was necessary, we know not; but we are told expressly, that we are “all by nature children of wrath,” that “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified,” and that “the wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the people that forget God.” The Son of God then took our nature on Him, that in Him it might do and suffer what in itself was impossible to it. What it could not effect of itself, it could effect in Him. He carried it about Him through a life of penance. He carried it forward to agony and death. In Him our sinful nature died and rose again. When it died in Him on the cross, that death was its new creation. In Him it satisfied its old and heavy debt; for the presence of His Divinity gave it transcendent merit. His presence had kept it pure from sin from the first. His Hand had carefully selected the choicest specimen of our nature from the Virgin’s substance; and, separating from it all defilement, His personal indwelling hallowed it and gave it power. And thus, when it had been offered up upon the Cross, and was made perfect by suffering, it became the first-fruits of a new man; it became a Divine leaven of holiness for the new birth and spiritual life of as many as should receive it. And thus, as the Apostle says, “If one died for all, then did *all* die;” “our old man is crucified *in Him*, that the *body* of sin might be destroyed;” and “together” with Christ “when we were dead in sins, hath He quickened us, and raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” Thus “we are members of His body, from His flesh, and from His bones: for whosoever eateth His flesh and drinketh His blood, hath eternal life,” for His flesh is meat indeed, and His blood is drink indeed; and “he that eateth His flesh and drinketh His blood dwelleth in Him, and He in him.”¹¹

What a very different view of life do these doctrines present to us from that which the world takes. Only think of this one thing—of the eagerness of the great mass of men after matters of time, after engagements of this world, after gain, after national aggrandizement, after speculations which promise public or private advantage; and having thought of this, turn back to the contemplation of Christ’s Cross, and then say, as candid men, whether the world, and all that is in the world, is not as unbelieving now as when Christ came. Does there not seem too great cause to fear that this nation, in spite of its having been baptized into the Cross of Christ, is in so unholy a state, that, did Christ come among us as He came among the Jews, we should, except a small remnant, reject Him as well as they? May we not

¹¹2 Cor 5.14; Rom 6.6; Eph 2.5, 6; 5.30; Jn 6.54.

be sure that men nowadays, had they been alive when He came, would have disbelieved and derided the holy and mysterious doctrines which He brought? Alas! is there any doubt at all, that they would have fulfilled Saint John's words,—“the darkness comprehended it not?” Their hearts are set on schemes of this world: there would have been no *sympathy* between them and the calm and heavenly mind of the Lord Jesus Christ. They would have said that His Gospel was strange, extravagant, incredible. The only reason they do not say so now is, that they are used to it, and do not really dwell on what they profess to believe. What! (it would have been said,) the Son of God taking human flesh, impossible! the Son of God, separate from God yet one with Him! “how can these things be?” God Himself suffering on the Cross, the Almighty Everlasting God in the form of a servant, with human flesh and blood, wounded, insulted, dying? and all this as an Expiation for human sin? Why (they would ask) was an Expiation necessary? why could not the All-merciful Father pardon without one? Why is human sin to be accounted so great an evil? We see no necessity for so marvellous a remedy; we refuse to admit a course of doctrine so utterly unlike anything which the face of this world tells us of. These are events without parallels; they belong to a new and distinct order of things; and, while our heart has no sympathy with them, our reason utterly rejects them.—And as for Christ's miracles, if they had not seen them, they would not have believed the report; if they had, they would have been ready enough to refer them to juggling craft,—if not, as the Jews did, to Beelzebub.

Such will the holy truths of the Gospel ever appear to those who live to this world, whether they love its pleasures, its comforts, its prizes, or its struggles; their eyes are waxen gross, they cannot see Christ spiritually. When they see Him, there is no beauty in Him that they should desire Him. Thus they become unbelieving. In our Lord's words, “No servant can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. *Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*”¹² When He said this, the Pharisees *derided Him*. And He said unto them, “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts, for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.” God grant that we may not be of those who “justify themselves before men,” and “deride” those who preach the severe doctrine of the Cross! God grant that, if we have any misgivings about the corruptions and defects of the religion now so popular among us, we may have the grace forthwith to desire honestly to know God's will! God grant that we may not attempt to

¹²Lk 16.13-15.

deceive our consciences, and to reconcile together, by some artifice or other, the service of this world and of God! God grant that we may not pervert and dilute His holy Word, put upon it the false interpretations of men, reason ourselves out of its strictness, and reduce religion to an ordinary commonplace matter—instead of thinking it what it is, a mysterious and supernatural subject, as distinct from any thing that lies on the surface of this world, as day is from night and heaven from earth! ❧