The Cross in St Paul (12.9.2019)

Holy Cross Day, which falls this week-end, marks the anniversary of the dedication in September 335 of the emperor Constantine's Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Linked with that is the tradition that a few years earlier the Emperor's mother, St Helena, had discovered the cross on which Jesus was crucified. In the Eastern Church it is almost as solemn and sombre as Good Friday. As part of our preparation for this commemoration we are examining what St Paul, as the first Christian theologian, has to say about the cross under six headings: the message of the cross, the boast of the cross, the peace of the cross, the offence of the cross, the pattern of the cross and, finally, the triumph of the cross.

We begin with what we might describe as his manifesto as an evangelist, words taken from the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the Christians of Corinth.

"Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,
'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'
"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

Paul's words are intended to drag the members of the Christian community in Corinth back from their petty faction fighting and fan-clubs to the central realities of the good news which he had been sent to proclaim. That "good news" he sums up as "the message about the cross".

Now, it's quite hard for us to understand, at nearly 2000 years' distance, how bizarre that must have seemed to Paul's contemporaries. Whatever the cross was, it was not "good news". It was the Romans' punishment of choice for those whose activity was a serious threat to the fabric of society. "The slaves' punishment", as it was known, was inflicted on rebels, deserters (provided they weren't Roman citizens), and runaway or insubordinate slaves. It was about horror, humiliation and misery (for the victim) and merciless mockery (from the bystanders). In the comedies of the Roman writer Plautus, who lived roughly two centuries before Christ, crucifixion was a rich source of black humour in the mouths of his slave characters. It wasn't "good news" by any stretch of the imagination.

So it's hardly surprising if "the message about the cross" was heard as "foolishness" by many of those to whom Paul proclaimed it. Non-Jews could not cope with the idea of a crucified god. The gap between the concept of "the divine" and the concept of "crucifixion" was simply too wide to be bridged. Jews had their own reasons for rejecting the idea that God – or, indeed, anyone approved by God – could suffer in this way. The Law of Moses stated quite clearly that "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse". That would be a major stumbling-block to accepting "the message about the cross" as good news.

But for Paul, the massage about the cross is central to his proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Messiah – so central that some scholars have doubted whether he knew any of the stories about Jesus' life with which we are familiar from the Gospels. For Paul the good news which he was sent to preach is summarised in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It isn't difficult to understand why. The cross is what makes Jesus utterly different from other wonder-working Jewish rabbis and from wandering holy men such as Apollonius of Tyana who worshipped the pagan gods and whose biography includes stories of healing and teaching which are quite closely parallel to some of the stories about Jesus.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, as Paul realised, God had turned all the rules of the game on their head. The resurrection of Jesus could mean only that God had vindicated a crucified man; that God's compassion and mercy embraced the whole of humanity – not just the "chosen", those genetically descended from Abraham; and not just the self-consciously "holy", those who set themselves to live lives that were ritually pure and to keep all the commandments of the Jewish Law. In Jesus, God identifies with those who were on the edge or beyond the edge, those who had been excluded from society. The death and resurrection of Jesus were God's guarantee that a new kind of life – life that does not depend on ritual purity, life that cannot be ended by torture, humiliation and physical death – that kind of life was available to all who lived with the same attitude of radical trust as Jesus. Those who did were, somehow, incorporated into his life and death and would share in his resurrection.

The message about the cross is a message about unconditional love, a love that is open not only to the one who is wise, the scholar, the "debater of this age" – in fact, as St Paul implies, wisdom and scholarship and a fondness for debate can seriously get in the way of understanding the nature of that love. The message about the cross is a message that engages us at the deepest level of our being. To grasp that fully requires us to follow the advice of the Eastern monk who instructed his disciples: "Every morning put your mind into your heart and stand in the presence of God all day long."

…

So, what was it that convinced St Paul that the cross of Christ was not something to dread, or reject as accursed, or politely ignore, but rather something to proclaim – even to boast about? We may find a clue at the very end of Paul's letter to the Christians of Galatia.

"It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."

"May I *never boast of* anything *except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which* the world *has been crucified to me, and* I *to the world."*

His experience of the risen Christ turned St Paul's world upside down. All the things in which he had placed his confidence were, as we have seen, called into question by the realisation that God had vindicated a crucified man, one who, according to the Law of Moses, was under God's curse. One consequence of this revelation was that things which had been a source of pride for the fiery young rabbi from Tarsus could be so no longer. The cross of Jesus had relativised them all and caused him radically to reassess what mattered. There was no longer any cause for boasting about things that mattered on the human level, in that egocentric web of relationships to which Paul refers, in theological shorthand, as "the flesh".

That understanding is at the heart of his criticism of those who wanted the Christians in Galatia to conform to the demands of the Jewish Law. They were trying to insist that Christians had to be Jewish. Paul insisted that the cross made all human distinctions irrelevant. What mattered was the single new humanity brought into being by Jesus' death and resurrection, a humanity in which distinctions based on social status, racial origin, even gender, were completely irrelevant. Earlier in this letter Paul had written "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus".

He reinforces the same message in the passage we have just heard: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!" *That* was worth making a fuss about. *That* was his ground for boasting in the cross of Christ. "Crucifixion and resurrection, and all that flows from them, are comparable only with the creation of the world." So wrote the great Methodist scholar Kingsley Barrett.

There's another strand to Paul's boasting, too. He is, incidentally, by far the most "boastful" of the New Testament writers – not in the sense of being a braggart, but in the sense that he uses the word "boast" and its compounds much more than any other writer. The word "boast" is found only in his letters and in the letter of James: and, apart from this passage in Galatians and a couple of passages in the letter to Rome, pretty well every other example comes from the two letters to the church in Corinth. In most of the places where Paul uses the word, he uses it in a sense and a setting that is not at all what we might expect.

Titus Maccius Plautus, the Roman playwright I mentioned earlier, provided much of the plot and pretty well all of the characters for Stephen Sondheim's musical "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum". One of those characters was a stock figure from Greek and Roman comedy, the braggart soldier ("Miles Gloriosus" in Latin) who is constantly boasting about his bravery, his success on the battlefield, the armies he has single-handedly routed, the enemy generals he has overcome in mortal combat. In his second letter to Corinth Paul takes on the character of this self-proclaimed super-hero – but he turns it on its head.

When Paul writes about boasting in his second letter to Corinth (which contains just under half of all his uses of the word), he does not boast about his great successes, his victories in the gospel. He boasts, instead, about the things that show his weakness: imprisonments, floggings, stonings, shipwreck, dangers of many kinds, sleeplessness, hunger, cold and nakedness – even the almost comic indignity of escaping from the agents of a hostile ruler by being let down over the walls of Damascus in a basket at the end of a rope. This is not boasting as it is normally understood.

It is, however, understandable when we set it against Paul's words in Galatians 6. "May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." All that Paul has seen and experienced has led him to a radical re-evaluation of the whole created order and of the place of Israel in it. Like a new creation, the death and resurrection of Jesus have changed everything. The cross has revealed God's solidarity not *exclusively,* with those who are (or try to be, or claim to be) heroically holy, but *inclusively,* with the failures, the kind of people summed up in the Gospels as "tax-collectors and sinners". In re-orienting his own life by "the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ", and making that his sole ground for boasting, Paul is affirming that the way to life lies through being conformed to the death of Jesus. To quote Kingsley Barrett again, "The cross is the enemy of all the rites and institutions to which [we] cling for salvation." People who live in the daily awareness of that are crucified to the world.

…

Among St Paul's letters, scholars generally agree that those to Rome, Corinth, Galatia and Philippi are genuine. Most scholars are inclined to add the first letter to the Thessalonians to that list and a slightly smaller majority would also include the second letter to Thessalonika. There is much less agreement about the letters to the Christian communities in Ephesus and Colossae. And of those two, Ephesians looks rather the more doubtful, for reasons which have to do with the language and thought of the letter and the concerns which it addresses, some of which seem to belong to a later generation than Paul's. That is why as we move from "the boast of the cross" to "the peace of the cross", I've taken a passage from the first chapter of St Paul's letter to Colossae.

"[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."

The whole of the first chapter of Colossians, once we get past the opening greeting, is focused on the cosmic significance of Jesus. That is the context in which Paul (or whoever was writing under Paul's name) explores the significance of Jesus for humankind. He is the one into whose kingdom God has "delivered us from the dominion of darkness", the one "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." It is from that point that the passage we have just heard takes wing.

The theme of cosmic reconciliation through the death and resurrection of Jesus is central to both Ephesians and Colossians. Ephesians depicts that reconciliation in terms of Jesus eliminating the division between Jews and Gentiles, breaking down the barriers between Jewish and non-Jewish culture to create a single new humanity. The central section of the letter's second chapter is the classic expression of this:

"Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father."

In other words, Jesus by his death brings those outside the scope of God's promises into union with his chosen people. There is much to reflect on here, when we consider Christian attitudes towards the Jews down the centuries. There the emphasis has been not on a single new humanity made up equally of Jews and non-Jews but on the dispossession of the Jews from their covenant relationship with God – a kind of theological (and sometimes, alas, all too literal) "ethnic cleansing". That is not at all how this letter understands the relationship – and in that it truly reflects the thought of St Paul. The letter to the Romans, in particular, emphasises how firmly the Christian experience is rooted in God's promises to Israel.

In the letter to the Colossians the reconciling work of Jesus takes place not only on a human, but also on a cosmic level. If the cross in Ephesians is pictured almost as a sledge-hammer breaking down the walls of division, in the letter to Colossae it is much more like the spike on the bursar's desk in the finance office of my theological college thirty-odd years ago. That was where Douglas, our bursar, would impale accounts that had been settled. "When you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross." This is part (for human beings a very important part) of what it means to talk of Christ reconciling "all things, whether on earth or in heaven". Divine Love has cancelled the claim which divine Justice has against the human race. A new relationship between God and humankind has now become possible.

More than that, by his death Jesus has freed humanity from its enslavement to what the letter to the Colossians calls "the elemental spirits of the universe", those powers which most people in the ancient world (and many people outside Western Europe even today) imagined as filling the space between earth and heaven, and affecting for good or ill (usually for ill) aspects of human life. Not that we are totally liberated from such thinking. People who assign a place of power to "market forces" or "the will of the people" or even "the selfish gene" are just as much prisoners of "the elemental spirits" as those who leave offerings at wayside shrines, or wear amulets to ward off the evil eye. By his death on the cross, Jesus liberates us from subservience to the "elemental spirits", however we may conceive them, and sets us free to serve the true and living God, whose power is the power not of fear, but of *love*.

Now let us return to the world's scandalised perception of the cross. As St Paul recognised in his first letter to the Church in Corinth, to "proclaim Christ crucified" is to proclaim what is "a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." It is this sense of the cross as "stumbling-block" which lies behind these words, written to the Christians of Galatia.

“You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offence of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.”

About a hundred and fifty years after St Paul wrote his letter to the churches of Galatia, someone (possibly a slave or a minor official in the imperial household) scratched a crude picture on the wall of a building on the Palatine Hill in Rome which once formed part of Caesar’s palace. It shows a short stubby figure, with his arms outstretched in prayer, looking at a cross on which there is a human figure with the head of a donkey. Beside the picture the “artist” scratched (in fairly ropy Greek) the words “Alexamenos worships God”.

That picture just about sums up the unbelieving world’s attitude to the cross. The donkey, in the ancient world, was an animal both stupid and unclean. The famous story of Buridan’s ass, which starved to death because it was tethered between two equally large and attractive piles of hay and could not decide which to eat, is in direct descent from the equally dim-witted donkeys of Aesop’s fables. And even today, in Turkey, to call someone a donkey (or, even worse, the *son* of a donkey) is to invite a smack in the eye. The second-century graffitist in that building on the Palatine was saying something fairly pungent about what St Paul calls “the offence of the cross”, as the Roman historian Tacitus did, in more measured terms, when he described the Christians of first-century Rome as “a class hated for their abominations”, and explained how “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.”

And, of course, as we have seen, the cross is an “offence”, a crucified God is an “offence”, “a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles”. That is why even Christians very often try to avoid their implications – and why Paul’s letter to the Galatians is such a bad-tempered one. The cross of Jesus relativises everything. It calls into question everything which encourages us to feel that we’ve made it, that we have a status which is somehow independent of God’s commitment to the whole of humankind, that there is one group which is “in” and another which is “out”. This is at the heart of Paul’s anger at the Galatians’ apparent desire to submit to the Jewish Law. They were putting their trust in human institutions (albeit divinely inspired institutions) rather than in the living God. They wanted to be safely part of the “in group”, rather than “out there” where, paradoxically, God was – and is. Salvation is not about what is sometimes called “a culture of safety first”.

Salvation, being “*saved*”, is not about being *safe*, but about being where God is – and “where God is” is not always where we would expect (or indeed wish). George Herbert, who was the subject of earlier talks in this series, recognised that when he wrote his poem, “Redemption”:

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,
    Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,
    And make a suit unto him, to afford
A new small-rented lease, and cancell th’ old.
In heaven at his manour I him sought:
    They told me there, that he was lately gone
    About some land, which he had dearly bought
Long since on earth, to take possession.
I straight return’d, and knowing his great birth,
    Sought him accordingly in great resorts;
    In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts:

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth
    Of theeves and murderers: there I him espied,
    Who straight, Your suit is granted, said, and died.

When Alexamenos saw the caricature of his Lord scratched on the wall, he scratched two words in reply. They were "Alexamenos: faithful". Alexamenos accepted the offence of the cross. Like George Herbert, he was content to share the "ragged noise and mirth of theeves and murderers", the humiliation and mockery endured by his Master. He had found not an offence, a stumbling-block. Rather he had found salvation in the cross.

In my postcard collection – yes, I am that sad – there is one which doesn't really belong with the views of the ski-slopes, the African elephants, the Roman remains or the Buddhist temples. It comes from the convent at Fairacres in Oxford and it's the photograph of a log, quite a big log, sawn from the trunk of what looks to have been a sizeable tree. The log has clearly been cut for some time, because the wood has begun to split, right down the centre: and the split is in the shape of a cross. The caption, printed on the back of the card, says simply, "The cross at the heart of all things" – which is where it belongs for Christians, as St Paul makes clear when he writes to the church in Philippi:

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Those words, which have become part of the Church's daily prayer and which we use as our profession of faith at the Eucharist in Holy Week – those words have been interpreted in many different ways by different commentators, most famously by Charles Gore, Bishop of Oxford at the time of the First World War, who used it as the basis of what scholars call "kenotic Christology", emphasising the self-emptying of Jesus as a way of interpreting the incarnation which was radically different from the traditional understanding of what it means to say that in Jesus God became human.

But these words are not intended as a theological or doctrinal statement. Whether they were Paul's own words or, as many scholars think, a very early Christian hymn, they were almost certainly written to encourage and inspire believers, not to teach. And, as Paul uses them here, they provide a pattern for Christian thinking and behaving. "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus…"

Now, this isn't detailed ethical advice – unlike, for example, the closing chapters of the letter to Colossae, or the "agony aunt"-style question and answer session which finds its way into the first letter to Corinth. What this passage does is to set the whole of Christian life within the framework of Christ's self-giving love, the love of which the cross is the ultimate symbol. What St Paul is commending to the community in Philippi is a self-forgetfulness, a humility in relation to others and before God which might well have come hard to citizens of a Roman colony, conscious of their privileged status and their rights before the law. What Paul is commending is the pattern of discipleship which, eleven centuries later, led Francis of Assisi to strip himself naked on a cold winter day and turn his back on his father's wealthy life-style. What Paul is commending is the pattern of discipleship which led Mother Teresa to resign the headship of a prestigious school and give her life to serving the poorest of Christ's poor.

Paul's message here is about the cost of discipleship, like those passages in Matthew, Mark and Luke, where Jesus warns those who want to follow him that they must "take up their cross" (St Luke adds "daily") and follow. But this isn't just about self-emptying and loss, any more than Jesus's words in Mark 8 and Matthew 16 and Luke 9 are about unrelieved suffering. The hymn doesn't end with Jesus "[humbling] himself and [becoming] obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross". It ends with the exaltation of Jesus. It ends with the acclamation of Jesus as the one at whose name "every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".

In writing this, Paul is consistent with the teaching of Jesus Christ the Lord, his Lord and ours. The pattern of the cross is the pattern of risk-taking commitment which Dietrich Bonhoeffer discerned in the years of his opposition to the Nazis and which he expressed in such a simple and profoundly moving way in the last moments before his execution, when he said good-bye to the fellow-prisoners who had been transported with him to the camp at Flossenburg: "This is the end, for me the beginning of life."

It is when we look at the lives of the martyrs through the ages that we find the pattern of the cross standing out in sharpest relief, the pattern of the life laid down for love's sake, the life laid down *for* God to be received back *from* God. This is the pattern with which Jesus shocks and appals our generation, living in a risk-averse culture. The good news of Jesus Christ is not, as some seem to think, "a gospel of prosperity", a promise of worldly blessings. It is a warning to those who put self and comfort at the centre that, one way or another, they will be stripped of everything. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for [Christ's] sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The pattern of the cross remains at the heart of all things, cracking the grain of the universe, and opening up the vision of eternal life beyond.

…

So far we have looked at the message about the cross which St Paul preached to the Christians of Corinth; we have considered the cross as grounds for boasting in the God whose love renders all human distinctions irrelevant; we have examined the peace which Christ has brought about by his death on the cross, and the offence to which that death gave rise in the ancient world: and just now we looked at the cross as it provides the pattern for Christian discipleship. Now, as we conclude our preparation for Holy Cross Day, we look toward the triumph of the cross.

"For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it."

Those words sum up the paradoxes of the message with which we began. The cross was hated and feared; those who were executed on it were despised, even regarded as accursed: but by Jesus's death on the cross "[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it."

Once again we need to go back to the ancient world to realise what an astonishing image this is. The commentators are uncertain about who is the subject of this sentence. Is it God, or is it Jesus? Very possibly, in Paul's mind at least, if not on paper, "God-in-Christ".

Either way, the imagery is a striking reversal of what the first readers would have expected – and one which loses its edge in modern English where "to triumph" usually means "to win", whether at a football match, or an awards ceremony, or in the latest vote to delay or to deliver Brexit. In the ancient world "to triumph" meant to celebrate a significant Roman military victory in a particular way. A triumph was awarded to a successful general for a major victory which he (and not one of his subordinate officers) had won and from which he had brought his army home in safety. It took the form of a procession, headed by the senate and the magistrates, and including trumpeters, white bulls for sacrifice, the most impressive spoils from the war, the leaders of the army which had been conquered and other important captives. The victorious general, dressed like a king or a god and wearing a laurel wreath, rode in a chariot with his troops marching behind him, dressed in mufti and usually chanting ribald verses about their commander in the affectionately obscene manner of football fans.

After the parade and a lavish sacrifice to the gods, there would be festivities across the city, while the defeated enemy general was quietly taken off to prison and put to death.

Paul, writing about "triumph of the cross", reverses all of this – quite literally in one sense, in that where the triumphing general rides into the city to the place of sacrifice, Jesus is led out of the city to the place of execution. It is the crucified prisoner, wreathed with thorns rather than laurel, naked and bleeding, who is both the victorious leader and the sacrifice. It is the rulers and authorities who are the spoils of war, the disarmed captives put on show before the public. Jesus has overcome all the powers and rendered them helpless. The vict*im* is the vict*or*.

But how has he done it? What is this tremendous victory which has reduced the cosmic powers to total helplessness? As we have seen already, the triumph of the cross is the triumph of love – and love is the power which has brought the universe and everything in it into being. Love is "the whole fullness of deity" which indwells Jesus bodily; creative, healing, life-giving love.

Evil cannot create. The only power evil has is the power to hurt, distort and destroy, which means that there can never be any equation between the power of evil and the power of God's love. What is more, the power of evil to destroy is limited to what has been created, so that when the uncreated being of God and the creative, life-giving love of God, embodied in Jesus, come under attack from all the destructive forces of the cosmos they cannot be overcome. As William Temple wrote, "to say that God is love means, among other things, that every purpose or policy which is hostile to love, which rests on selfishness, is bound to end in disaster, for it is opposing the supreme principle of existence." The cowardice of the disciples, the lies of Simon Peter, the betrayal of Judas, the fear and cruelty of the religious and political authorities – these, and all the other acts of cowardice, lying, betrayal, fear and cruelty that there ever have been or ever will be (including our own) – all of these are doomed to end in failure and disaster. Jesus's obedient acceptance of their consequences has seen to that.

By the cross "[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it." This coming week-end, as in Holy Week, our role is like that of the soldiers in mufti at the end of the triumphal procession. But, unlike those soldiers, we shall not be chanting ribald verses. Instead we shall be chanting the praises of him who died, and of that "wondrous cross", that "tree of beauty, tree most fair", the gallows on which God's Son took on all the forces of evil out of love for all humanity – even those who condemned him, those who tortured and killed him. For his love still stretches out, as his arms stretched out against the wood of the cross, to embrace all his Father's sinful creatures and bring them back to God.

A.W.D.

8th September, 2019