

THE TRIUMPH OF THE HOLY CROSS

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'... God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (Jn 3:16)

Some time ago a group of small children were walking two by two and hand in hand along a street in Belfast, Northern Ireland. All of a sudden a car swung round a corner, a window was wound down, and a live grenade was thrown in their path. A man passing by saw what was happening. With split-second timing he threw himself flat on the grenade and smothered the explosion, at the cost of course of his own life.

It was a heroic deed. A deed for which those children and their families will be always grateful! Yet, as it turns out, it was the only good deed that man had ever done. For in his community he was known as a ne'er do well, a derelict, a no-hoper, a burden to himself and an embarrassment to his family. It could not be said that he had died as he had always lived - thinking of others, helping others, caring for others, loving others.

But when we come to the death of Jesus, we do not hesitate to say: *'He died as he had always lived - not for himself but for others.'* Jesus died with love and generosity, with compassion and forgiveness in his heart. How he died was the summary and climax of how he lived. How he died was, in fact, the completion and fulfilment of his mission to love, his mission to bring God's love down to earth. His mission not only to tell people that God is love, but also to show people in dozens of different ways, just how real and warm, how strong and constant, how kind and caring, how patient and enduring is God's love for them! His mission, indeed, may be pictured in terms of God the Father saying to his Son as he set out on his life's work: *'Go to my people. Tell them that I love them. Show them that I love them. Gather them together and bring them back to me.'*

Night and day Jesus of Nazareth communicated to the people he met, the warmth and tenderness of God's love. This was true in his preaching and teaching. The Fourth Eucharistic Prayer says so beautifully: *'To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation, to prisoners freedom, and to those in sorrow joy.'* This was true too in his healings. They were much more than help, practical help. They were revelations of what goes on in the mind and heart of God, of what God thinks of his suffering people, of how God feels for them, and of how God shares in their hopes and struggles, doubts and fears. So much so that in the loving words and deeds

of Jesus, the compassion of God was revealed and recognized, shown and seen, announced and heard, offered and accepted, given and received.

It has to be said, however, that a positive response to the constancy and consistency of the love of Jesus of Nazareth for people, was much truer of women than of men. Martha and Mary, the woman at the well, the woman in the city who was a sinner, the women of Jerusalem weeping over him on the road to Calvary, to name just a few, treasured his friendship and walked with him to the very end. As a famous Passionist Father, Francis Clune, used to say so well and so often: *'In the gospels no woman betrays Jesus, no woman denies Jesus, and no woman deserts Jesus!'*

If only the same thing could be said of the men in the Passion story! But the record speaks for itself. From his inner circle of apostles, friends and co-workers, first of all, it is precisely betrayal, denial and desertion, which Jesus receives in his hours of greatest need. From the religious leaders of his people - the Scribes, the Pharisees, and the Temple Priests - Jesus receives even worse than that. It was their pride and jealousy, their malice and hatred, so fierce and so violent, that nailed him to the cross. For they could not bring themselves to accept Jesus and the kind of God he proclaimed - a God who loves ordinary people, a God who loves the little ones, a God who welcomes sinners to his table and eats with them, a God of aliens and outsiders, of the *'lost'*, the grief-stricken and the heart-broken!

So the story of the passion of Jesus is very much a story of love refused, of love denied, of love betrayed. It is therefore a story of evil. The evil of human coldness and callousness, indifference and cowardice, pride and envy, malice and hostility, cruelty and weakness! But, thanks be to God, that's not all there is. The passion story is even more, and much more, the story of the light shining in the darkness, of goodness triumphing over evil, of love defeating hatred, and of resurrection from death and destruction. So St Paul of the Cross, Founder of the Passionists, calls it *'the most overwhelming work of God's love'*.

The passion story is definitely, then, a story of the enduring love of Jesus, dying for what he believed in, dying for what he lived for, dying as he had lived, dying with words of love and forgiveness and compassion on his lips. So John does not hesitate to say with a sense of triumph: *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'* (Jn 3:17).

Today that triumph of good over evil, that triumph of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, is continuing in you and me. We rejoice, then, that his triumph is being continued in who we are,

what we say, and what we do. As St Teresa of Avila is said to have said so well:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours! Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world! Yours are the feet through which he walks to do good! Yes, Christ has no body now on earth but yours!

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