

29 The Crucified Lord

The death of Jesus has been the focus of our dearest, most persistent and most understandable heresies. By subtle manipulation of the gospel, we have managed to make it mean, in many ways, the opposite of what it does mean, and we have done this not by inventing ideas of our own but by using one acceptable half of the truth to block out the other half that we don't want to know.

The problem is power, which Jesus rejected and which we are afraid to reject.

It has been the problem thru much of the two thousand years of Christian history, and the reason why Christian societies and Christian nations of the past and the present can show the world only their denial of Jesus the Lord. It is why the history of the Christian world is a history of arrogance, fear, oppression, greed, exploitation, slavery, war and cruelty. It is why Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Confucians, Buddhists, rationalists and atheists looking at the Christian world see nothing to show them the reality of Jesus, the Kyrios over all.

Jesus died the death of a prophet, the death of those who speak up with the voice of God against those who wield power to oppose the will of God. He died, as prophets die, because the irresistible energy, hope, resourcefulness, and adventure of God, the life and Spirit of God, does not include power anywhere in its agenda. What we know as power, the ability to compel the behavior of others, is not in God's repertoire. Even to save his own, God does not resort to the imposition of power, and so God's prophets, and so the Son of Man, the Son of God, will also die.

We prefer to think that God, for reasons of his own, reserves his power for later use, or sets it aside in patience and mercy, to allow time for a better response before he finally takes action with all his power. It mite be thought that the apparent weakness of God in the present will be put right in the future with action that will demonstrate the strength and the power of God. Perhaps that is what the prophet Zechariah had in mind when he cried out with his dying breth, "The Lord will see this and avenge it!"

But all such thoughts are wrong, and shown to be wrong in the crucifixion of Jesus. That Jesus the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God, is crucified, is God's utter renunciation of all the pretensions of power. He was

crucified because he challenged power and because God does not meet power with power. Jesus is God's last word, God's full and final plan for the government of the world. He is the Kyrios. The angels were not wrong or misleading when they proclaimed the birth, in the town of David, of a Savior who is the Messiah and Lord. That voice of God declaring, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" was not an illusion. Jesus was not premature when he announced the coming of God's rule in Nazareth: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus approaching Jerusalem accepted the acclamation of his followers as the King coming in God's name. When he made the Temple, the seat of Israel's native government, the house of his teaching, it was not just a metaphor for something quite different, but the effective claiming and establishing of God's rule over Israel, the kingdom of God coming as promised into Israel's history and Israel's world. And because in God's rule, in God's kingdom, there is no resort to power, the men of power are literally in their own element when they move against Jesus, and they have their way. Such is the kingdom of God.

It's more than we can take, this total renunciation of power. So we make it different. We say that Jesus is Kyrios, Lord, not here but in another world; that his kingdom was not in Jerusalem, but in Heaven; that his death was not about the way we govern and rule in present history, but about the plan of God for a still future and transcendent world. And because such a view is so much at odds with the proclamation that runs thru Luke's gospel (and the other gospels), we draw on a deep and mity insite from the writings of Paul to obscure and overrule any nagging objections from the gospel. Heresy cannot work unless it takes strength from a strong dose of truth.

The doctrine of the atonement, that Jesus died to atone for our sins and so to reconcile us to God, is so profound an insite into the meaning of his death, that it can be made our excuse for ignoring what else the gospel tells us. It's an escape, a relief to say that it's that, and only that, not a final and authoritative decision about how this world is to be governed. But then, when it lacks the insite of the gospel, we lose sight of any reason for Jesus' death other than the arbitrary will of God. The doctrine of the atonement becomes a parody, in which an angry God is somehow appeased because one more sin is added to all the sins of humankind and Jesus is crucified.

We fall into such blasphemies thru trying to avoid the more radical challenge: the revelation that Jesus is Lord and Ruler of the present world and its history and that he died because it was God's way, and his way, to rule without any recourse to the power that we consider essential. It is on

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this, if we are bold enuf to believe it, that we will be tested, for a world that is quite at ease with our belief in the atonement, is deadly serious in its determination to amass power and to govern by power, and so rejects the crucified Jesus as Kyrios or Lord of all its history. The world in general holds no views on the atonement, and will let us get on with it; but the world in general, the world of our prosperous and powerful nations, which even now are challenged by the coming of the kingdom, is as determined to reject his kind of rule as were those who sent him to his death.

Under the influence of a deep belief in the atonement, and taking it to heart as Jesus' saving act for each one of us individually, we let ourselves escape from the truth with which the gospel challenges us. The death of Jesus, we say, was God's merciful plan for our salvation. It needs no other explanation. It has no other relevance. When we see the humility of Jesus' surrender to the power of men, we let ourselves believe that this has nothing to do with the way that government is to be conducted in the present world, but has all to do with God's plan for admitting us, eventually, to a kingdom somewhere else.

Once the heresy is firmly bedded in, we find it easy to tell ourselves that we may give our allegiance to leaders who are engaged in the "realistic" pursuit of power, the use of welth and weaponry to impose an order in the interests of the world's most successful nations, because that's how the present world is. The crucifixion is about our eternal salvation, and any new or different order for the world we currently have to live in is postponed, awaiting a future coming of Jesus. Jesus is not Lord, not Kyrios, except of a different kingdom in heven; and in the conduct of ordinary human history, power, greed and compulsion have to be accepted as the way of the world.

In the end, it becomes possible for Christians who believe fervently in the doctrine of the atonement to support the wars and the selfish domination of trade that characterise the world's most powerful nations, to join the British Grenadiers or the US Marines, to make money from the world's unbalanced banking system and live comfortably from the worldwide exploitation of the poor. There are Christians even within the military or the halls of banking and commerce who will speak to their colleagues with enthusiasm of the Savior, but will not speak of his challenge to their ways of welth and power – or of his death at the hands of the welthy and powerful.

For them, half of Luke is right. The Savior has come; but the King is not yet born, and others, whose ways are more like Caesar's, are Lord in this world.

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When Luke tells us the story of Jesus' trial and execution, it is the same event that we read of in Mark's gospel, but told from a different point of view, from the recollections of different witnesses. We know that Luke used the gospel of Mark for substantial parts of his own gospel, so we know that when he chose to draw on other sources for his account of the crucifixion, this was deliberate. He wanted to give a different view. Luke knew that the death of Jesus is the most profoundly significant event in the whole of history. He knew that it is impossible to give an account of it without responding to it and interpreting it according to our understanding of history and of humanity, so he drew his account from witnesses who had seen in the events a significance that he too recognised.

It seems to me that Mark has learnt his account of the death of Jesus from one source, one line of preaching or one firm church tradition, not by sifting and choosing from various witnesses. At least his story tells like that: strait, swift-moving and powerful. Many would say that he had his account from the disciple Peter. Luke, on the other hand, was thinking of a number of records and witnesses, as he himself affirms at the start of his work:

Since many people have undertaken to give an account of the events that have taken place ... I too, after going over everything carefully ...
(1: 1, 3)

Now one part of the tradition which Luke particularly gives us is the prayer of forgiveness and the question arises, since he wasn't there himself, where did he get this information? Luke drew carefully and selectively on the reports of many witnesses, perhaps including the women, of whom he takes so much more notice than Mark does. Perhaps it was one of these who heard Jesus' prayer of forgiveness, so that it was remembered and told in some of the Christian communities.

Or perhaps it comes to us in a different way: thru the witnesses' encounter with Jesus after his death. For this unique event involves that possibility as no other does: encounter and communication with the one who, having died, is alive and relates again to his followers. It is not possible to separate our knowledge of Jesus' death from our knowledge of the risen Lord, and we know from the incidents I have mentioned in the "Acts of the Apostles" that Peter and other witnesses were convinced of God's forgiveness for the people and the leaders who had put Jesus to death. It is possible that they recognised and accepted that forgiveness as a positive communication from their risen Lord, the Lord's own comment on his crucifixion. In that case, Luke, or others in the Christian community, would find it quite appropriate

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to put such a prayer on the lips of the dying Jesus, since it expressed accurately what he ment and what he later showed.

Neither Luke nor Mark were historians or biographers in the modern sense. They are interpreters, giving the meaning of events already known or soon known from their story.¹ They tell us what happened, and in that sense they were writing history, but they were much more concerned than a modern historian would be, to make the story convey its own meaning, like a work of art or a drama. So they select incidents, arrange them, and present both details and dialogue in words of their choosing, to bring home the meaning that they have recognised in the events. They do not make up a story, but they choose creatively how they tell it, to reveal its meaning.

Jesus died in agony a death devised by Roman ingenuity to maximise the pain and humiliation of the victim. When Mark tells the story there is no mitigation of the horror, or of the pain of abandonment that Jesus experienced; but Luke is more concerned with its meaning as the beginning of Jesus' rule. He does not stress the cruelty and pain of it (altho of course anyone in the Roman world would know what a terrible death crucifixion was). He leaves the flogging as Pilate's suggestion, without telling us that it was indeed carried out.

Insted, he shows us the irony of Jesus' humiliation: mocked as a prophet by the temple police, and as a king both by Herod's soldiers and the guards at the cross. Yet that is what he really is, the prophet who dies as prophets do die, because the powerful, even when they are priests, do not want to hear the views of God. He is the king who rightfully rules in Jerusalem, while Herod is no more than the Roman stooge in Galilee.

Whatever else is happening, Jesus goes to his death as a prophet and a ruler. When he speaks, he does so with authority. He tells the women mourners what must be the object of their pity and so declares, in sorrow, the true state of Jerusalem. He speaks to God as his father, asking forgiveness for his executioners. He declares the acceptance of the dying thief and the approach of paradise.

¹ Of course, modern historians also interpret and tell us what they consider to be the significance of events, but they try to give us their interpretation separately from their recording of the events, thereby maintaining a professional objectivity for at least part of their work. Historians and biographers in Luke's culture were less particular, and would, within limits, rearrange their presentation of events so as to bring out the meaning.

In Mark's account, we are struck by Jesus' helplessness,² in Luke's by his authority. They are not two rival accounts, but each in its own way explores the mystery of ultimate authority revealed in ultimate helplessness, for that is the mystery of Jesus' death. Mark wants us to know that Jesus is the Messiah, but that every trace of power and triumph as we are used to looking for them in our rulers, is gone, that these are not the authority of God. Luke wants us to see that in his humiliation and death, Jesus is coming into his kingdom and already exercising the authority of his rule. It is the same conviction viewed from different angles.

As we read each of the accounts of Jesus' death, in Mark, Luke and John,³ we cannot fail to notice that they are different, especially in what happens from the cross. Mark shows us the pain and horror of Jesus' end as it was for Jesus. Luke shows us both the humanity and the authority of Jesus, reaching out to others even as he is dying in pain. John wants us to see that the cross is the culmination of Jesus' work and the realisation of his glory. Precisely because they are different, it is important to hear each one's account in its own right, understanding what this author is saying to us, and not being distracted by ideas from another.

But, different as they are, it is for all of them the same message of utter paradox, in terms of human ideas of power and glory. For all of them it is the rejection of pride and violence, even the pride and violence that is bound up with nationhood, from the establishment of God's authority and the realisation of God's plans. For each of them, Jesus is finally, in his death, Messiah, Lord and King, in a way that fundamentally challenges every individual and every establishment of authority.

Jesus' death is not about some other world and reality, but about this world. It has such relevance for the present order that the very sun is darkened at its taking place. It is so decisive for the history of this world, for God's energetic and inspiring presence in it, that the curtain of the sanctuary can no longer hide the Lord and is torn in two.

In the end, at the moment of Jesus' death, Luke does not recall, like Mark, the loneliness and horror of abandonment, but rather that trust in God which is below and above all levels of awareness and feeling. It is there even when it is not felt, implicit in the words "my God", and made explicit in the prayer "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The final prayer of Jesus is not necessarily Luke reporting something heard from the cross, but

² cf Jesus Messiah, ch 17

³ Matthew's account is not so strikingly different from Mark's.

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it is a true statement of Jesus' fundamental attitude and the ground of all his being, doing and suffering. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."