

THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENT IN HISTORY

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CHRISTIANS look upon Christ's death as the central fact of history. They see history as a symphony whose melody rises in crescendo to the climax of the Crucifixion, and thence receives a new impetus to diffuse its tones to the end of time. So they were shocked by this recent news item:

To advertise a new history book, one of our American publishing companies asked a panel of twenty-eight historians, educators, and journalists to rate the one-hundred most significant events in history. First place went to Columbus' discovery of America. Second: Gutenberg's development of movable type. Eleven events tied for third place. Tied for fourth place were U. S. Constitution takes effect, ether makes surgery painless, X-ray discovered, Wright brothers' plane flies, Jesus Christ is crucified.

Shocking, yes, but nonetheless easy to understand. The selection is *natural*, one following upon *natural* presuppositions, and based upon a philosophy which is just that, Naturalism. The historians of this school hold for one reality, denying the fact that anything exists outside of human experience. They will not admit the existence of the Transcendent Reality from which all historical events come into being and to which they are ordered. Hence, when they seek to interpret the historical significance of a particular event, their judgment must, of necessity, be in error.

How can an historian seek to penetrate into the historical meaning of the fact of Christ's Crucifixion and its relation with the past and future, when he has already distorted reality by negating the influence of Him in Whom we live and move and are? It is impossible to be raised to a true and complete knowledge of the significance of Christ on the Cross, if you do not even allow for the possibility of His being more than a mere man. So we turn to Christ Who alone knows fully what place He occupies in the history of mankind.

TEACHER WITH POWER

In the autumn of the year 27 A.D.¹ an Israelite not much over

¹ La Grange, M. J., O.P., *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Westminster, Md., The Newman Publishing Co., 1938, vol. 2, p. 307. The chronology of the Gospel events used in this article is that of Père La Grange.

thirty presents Himself to John for baptism.² Historically speaking this event receives its importance from the fact that it is the first public appearance of Christ. So with this as a starting point we shall read the Gospel, considering it as an account of something that has taken place. Because the gospel is an historical document, we shall expect to find not only the doctrine of its central figure, but, even more, the revelation of His identity. Not what the young Jew on the Cross taught, but *who He is* gives His crucifixion significance as an historical event. True historical knowledge begins when given facts become accurately known. These facts are the source of all subsequent historical interpretation. From such interpretation flows a complete grasp of the significance of any event in history.

In every movement among men we can trace a pattern of gradual development. Man only advances step by step, with stops and starts. This truth is particularly verified in the growth of a teaching which demands for its acceptance a reformation of the heart. Since the Gospel is the narration of the acceptance of such a doctrine, it should and does tell of this human process. Though the seed is divine, the soil is human.

Christ enters the field of Israel which has been cultivated by a long series of revelations of the prophets and psalmist, by merciful punishments through the centuries. John, the last of the prophets, stops his plowing and pays homage to the Sower. He urges his own disciples to follow Him, explaining to them that the only reason for his baptizing was that "He might be made known to Israel" (John 1: 31). Some do follow (John 1: 37-42) and return with Jesus to Galilee. Here more recruits are added. The entire group is invited to a marriage feast and during its course their Master "manifests His glory and His disciples believe in Him" (John 2: 11). The performing of the miracle in which natural water was turned into wine was proof that their Teacher was not merely an expounder of the Law, but One Who had been given power by God.

"Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand" (John 2:13). Jesus, showing that He did not come to destroy the Law, goes up to Jerusalem to fulfill one of the obligations which fell upon Him as a "son of the Law." In the temple, acting as an intrepid avenger of God's rights He drives the traders out of His Father's House (John 2: 13-22). On hearing that the Baptist has been thrown

² Luke 3: 21-22; Mark 1: 9-11; Matt. 3: 13-17.

into prison, He returns and goes "about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness among the people" (Matt. 4: 23).

CONFLICT

The teaching and preaching of Jesus coupled with His zealous action as a firebrand of God in the temple could not fail to disturb the recognized teachers of the divinely inspired Mosaic Law. "And it came to pass on one of the days, that He sat teaching. And there were Pharisees and teachers of the Law sitting by" (Luke 5: 17). They must see for themselves who this wonder worker is and what doctrine He is proposing. "And behold some men were carrying upon a pallet a man who was paralyzed. . . . And seeing their faith, He said, 'Man, thy sins are forgiven thee'" (Luke 5: 18-20).

This statement moved the Pharisees to indignation. They thought to themselves, "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?" (Luke 5: 21) According to Jewish belief the power of forgiving sins was reserved to Jahweh alone.³

"But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, answered and said to them, Why are you arguing in your hearts? Which is easier to say, Thy sins are forgiven thee, or to say, Arise and walk? But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins—He said to the paralytic—'I say to thee arise, take up thy pallet and go to thy house.'" (Luke 5: 22-24).

The man arises at once, picks up his cot-like bed and goes into his house praising God. All the bystanders join with him in his praise and doubtless the Pharisees themselves were also astonished. But astonishment quickly flamed into resentment. Their conviction that only God could forgive sin was too deeply rooted to be torn from their minds by this miraculous cure. In their opinion not even the promised Messiah could take to himself divine power. They leave Him, wondering who this "Son of Man" is, that He should encroach upon divine rights.

SON OF MAN

This use of the name, "Son of Man," by Jesus presents a difficulty. After so patent an implication of His Divinity by the remission of the paralytic's sins, why does He apparently choose

³ Cf. Is. 43:25; Ezech. 36:25.

to veil His Divine origin behind the cloak of so mysterious a name?

To understand this reserve and the selection of the expression "Son of Man," it is necessary to remember that with the passing of centuries of occupation by successive conquerors, the Messianic prophesy had lost its spiritual significance for the Jewish people. It had been diluted by time, war, and political intrigue, so that the mere mention of his coming aroused fiery patriotism, a desire for independence and revenge. Hence, although Jesus could not renounce this royal title, He first had to strip it of its worldly connotation, purify it and give it back its original spiritual meaning. It is for this task that He chooses the term "Son of Man."⁴ It is a pedagogical device of the Master-Teacher.

Christ uses this phrase to reveal His Humanity with an implication of His Divinity. His Humanity is taught in such statements as "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head," and "the Son of Man came eating and drinking" (Matt. 8: 20; 11: 19). He implies His Divinity in "the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" and "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Matt. 9: 6; 12: 8). He points out to His disciples the Messianic mission of suffering by saying that "the Son of Man must suffer many things," and "the Son of Man is to be betrayed into the hands of men" (Mark 8: 31; Matt. 17: 21). He stresses the transcendent nature of the Kingship of the Messiah by declaring: "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven"; "the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of His glory" (Matt. 24: 30; 19: 28).

THE DIE IS CAST

Having presented what seems to be a feasible answer to our difficulty, we can now return to a chronological reading of the Gospel. The first conflict with the Pharisees over Jesus' claim of having power to forgive sins is followed by others. In one particular encounter Jesus declares Himself to be "Lord of the Sabbath" and proves His claim by healing a withered hand on the Sabbath. He thereby overrules rabbinical jurisprudence, which permitted no work on the Sabbath except when there was danger of death.⁵

"But they were filled with fury, and began to discuss among themselves what they should do to Jesus" (Luke 6: 11). The die

⁴ La Grange, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, p. 137.

⁵ Luke 6: 6-10; Mark 3: 1-5; Matt. 12: 9-13.

is cast. In breaking the strict Sabbath law Jesus gives them an opportunity for their casuistry. It is only a matter of time given to political plotting before they will be able to bring about the destruction of this "self-appointed teacher."

FORMATION OF THE DISCIPLES

After a year of teaching and preaching throughout the district of Galilee Jesus is well aware that His work, humanly speaking, is a failure. He has not been able to root out His listeners' earth-bound preconception of the Messiah and replace it with a spiritual one. Dexterously He had sought to show that the Messiah's mission was concerned only with the human soul and its destinies. He had confirmed His teaching with startling miracles. All was of no avail. They wanted an earthly king; they would compel Jesus to become the Messiah of their dreams.

Time was short. Christ had a perpetual Mission. He did not come to save only His Jewish contemporaries from their sins, but all men of all ages. So from this time onward Jesus would devote Himself more completely to the formation of the chosen Twelve, who are to carry on His saving Mission until the end of time.

Christ decides to begin by setting forth even more clearly the true nature of Messianism, Christianity's true spirit. He considers this to be the opportune time to restate the prophesy of Isaiah that the Christ is to be a "man of sorrows" (Is. 53: 3) before He enters into His promised glory.

Before He begins this new phase in His teaching, Christ must be certain that the chosen ones have an unwavering faith in Him, that all their doubts are settled. He asks them, "Who do men say the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16: 13) Their replies show that their Master's ministry has been marked with so many miracles no one could possibly take Him for a mere ordinary man. Jesus then asks the pointed question. "But who do *you* say that I am? (Matt. 16: 15). The impulsive Peter gives the monumental reply: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The narratives of St. Mark and St. Luke end the dialogue abruptly with this answer. Were it not for St. Matthew's recording of Jesus' reply to this profession of faith, there might be a basis for supposing that Peter means nothing more than, "Thou art Messiah." Listen to the almost joyous words of Christ! "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee, but my Father in heaven" (Matt. 16: 17).

There can be no doubt that his Master is acknowledging and confirming that Peter has been interiorly enlightened concerning Christ's Divinity.

Having the faith of His little group, Jesus proceeds to remove any illusions His disciples might still have concerning His Messiahship. He does this by two predictions of His Passion and Resurrection (Luke 9: 22; 9: 43-45). His mission is to be marked by great suffering before He conquers death by His Resurrection. No earthly triumph was to be His, for His mission was wholly spiritual in character. This notion of their Master's being handed over to the Gentiles by Israel, however, was a stumbling block for them. The disciples, being Jews, found in it an obstacle which proved to be impossible for their minds to surmount at this stage of their formation. Yet it is not necessary that a complete grasp of a truth be had before it can be used as a stepping stone to further knowledge. A complete understanding of individual parts usually comes with the knowing of the whole.

So with the concept of the Messiah now emptied of its worldly connotations, and with the disciples in possession of a clear idea of His Divinity, Jesus further reveals Himself. He would have His disciples know that it is not His Messiahship from whence springs His greatness, but rather from His equality with God. The occasion He chooses to give them a greater understanding of His relationship with the Father seems to have the nature of a reward, following as it does upon their Master's joyful thanksgiving to His Father for their increasing fidelity to Him as God's ambassador.

"In that very hour He rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I praise Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou didst hide these things from the wise and prudent, and didst reveal them to little ones. Yes, Father, for such was thy good pleasure. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Father is except the Son, and him to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."

(Luke 10: 21-22; Matt. 11: 25-27).

In reading these words we are transported into the depths of the Divinity. *All things have been delivered to me by my Father*—all greatness, authority, power. Literally nothing belongs to the Father alone, it is held also by Jesus, the God-Man. The Father is all perfect, and receives this perfection from no one; the Son is all perfect too, but receives this perfection from the Father. The degree of the perfection being exactly the same, the source of their perfection is wherein they differ.

No one knows who the Father is except the Son. This is the source of their Master's majesty. Through this declaration we are plunged more deeply into the bosom of the Godhead, into the transcendent sphere "where knowledge is the measure of being and being the principle of knowledge."⁶ The God-Man declares His equality with God because He has complete knowledge of the Father who is unknowable in His essence to all but the Un-created.

... *and him to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.* This third statement flows directly as a consequence from the unity of nature which Jesus has affirmed to exist between Him and His Father. By a free gift of God the apostles believe in His Divinity and through their union with Him by faith they are given a participation in this Divine Life. They, too, by their assent to Christ's words "exult in the hope of the glory of the sons of God" (Rom. 5:2).

With these words Jesus completes His revelation concerning His identity: He is the Son of God. This declaration, of course, was not immediately accepted by His disciples. Following the natural process of forming a conviction, it was a gradual, step by step growth and only after the Resurrection did it succeed in receiving their full assent. The Resurrection put to death all doubts they could entertain. It was the historical fact that their Master, having been put to death, was with them again that convinced them. They suffered death for this belief.

THE TRIAL

We have seen how Jesus, the greatest of teachers, has progressively revealed His identity to His disciples and by His statements and works implicitly made it known to all. Now He is going to declare Himself before the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court.

The Sanhedrin was composed of the chief priest, the elders who represented the aristocracy and wealthy landowners, and the scribes. They had been called together by Caiphas who in his capacity as high priest presided over the assembly. This was their "hour and the power of darkness" (Luke 22:53); the moment they had been awaiting for over a year. "Now the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin were seeking witnesses against Jesus that they might put Him to death" (Mark 14:55).

⁶ La Grange, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 8.

The power of the Sanhedrin, however, was seriously restricted by the Roman occupational government. The members of this assembly knew that they could not pronounce an effective death sentence. The Roman governor alone had the power over life and death. Yet, the Gospel text says explicitly that the Sanhedrin was intent upon putting Christ to death. Père La Grange, after noting this textual problem, says :

But, to tell the truth, this was a time of transition, and it is difficult to judge precisely concerning the situation. The Roman principle was that provinces of the Empire, and this applied especially to the Jews who had long been treated as allies, should be allowed a certain autonomy in their internal, and particularly, their religious affairs. Had a Jew been condemned to death by his own people for some notorious crime of impiety, Pilate would doubtless have made no difficulty about signing the death warrant.⁷

Even though ostensibly they sought his death, the Sanhedrin was not anxious to assume the whole responsibility for Jesus' death. Messianism was involved, and to the Romans the Messiah meant only one thing, political conspiracy. Pilate had to give the sentence ; but on the other hand, no Jew should be handed over to the Roman government unless his own national religious government had declared him to be guilty of death.

So, Jesus' conviction has a double aspect. To the Jews it was a religious trial ; but they had to give it the appearance of a political case, in order to win an understanding approval of His conviction from Pilate. The first thing necessary, then, was to discover some religious charge involving the death sentence.

This proved to be difficult. The testimonies of the false witnesses did not agree. Caiphas, fearing that the trial would be drawn out to great lengths, takes a short cut to the end he desires. With a show of solemnity he says, "If thou art the Christ, tell us" (Luke 22: 66). Jesus replies, "If I tell you, you will not believe me ; and if I question you, you will not answer me, or let me go" (Luke 22: 67-68). During the past two years when they would not even listen to His words, He had appealed to His deeds as a motive for accepting Him. All to no avail. Besides, He was already judged in the mind of the council and it would be fruitless for Him to ask them what they understood by the term Christ, to inquire if it was really a crime to be the "anointed one of God."

Yet, Christ always is the model for man's actions. He is be-

⁷ LaGrange, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 243.

fore the supreme tribunal of the nation endowed with authority from His Father. He confesses that He is the Christ and adds that He would soon be acknowledged by all, when He, the Son of Man, being seated at the right hand of the power of God comes upon the clouds of heaven.⁸ Yes, He is the Messiah. It is about Him that they, the doctors of Law, had read in the Psalms and in Daniel.⁹

The whole assembly burst forth, "Art thou, then, the Son of God?" (Luke 22: 70) Jesus, the master of the situation, answers, "You yourselves say that I am." Thus, He notes for the ages to come upon what charge He is condemned. Rending his garments in mock horror, Caiphias cries out, "He has blasphemed; what further need have we of witnesses? Behold, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think? . . . He is liable to death" (Matt. 26: 65-66). Christ died because He claimed to be God's only begotten Son. This claim the Jews, mired in their pride, could not raise their wills to accept.

MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENT OF HISTORY

Through the centuries millions have accepted this claim. Thousands have died for it. Instinctively men consider conduct right or wrong depending on whether it is Christian conduct. Christ has led more crusades, inaugurated more reforms than all other leaders put together. Whether one stands in art galleries, browses about libraries, or listens to the music of the masters, he is forced to admit that He is the most significant Person of history.

Granting the fall of man and his consequent need of redemption, there is one act of this Person which is the most significant in all history, His death on the Cross. "For . . . when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Rom. 5: 10). His pierced hands remade the world, turned the flow of centuries back to God. It is because of this event that Columbus named the Bahama island on which he first landed, San Salvador, Holy Saviour. Historians may claim for Columbus' feat of courage the title of the Most Significant Event of History, but he and all Christians find their eyes centered upon Christ on the Cross. They believe that He is all that He said He is, the Son of God and the Saviour of men.

⁸ Cf. Luke 22:69; Mark 14:62; Matt. 26:64.

⁹ Ps. 109:1; Dan. 7:9.