

PORTRAIT OF LOVE

DECLAN KANE, O.P.



N ADULT rather puzzles a child by telling him, "Enjoy your youth, sonny, these are the best days of your life." The adult's point is understandable; looking back on his own carefree, younger days, he remembers only their joyous gaiety and freedom. The worries, cares and sorrows that afflict him now as an adult only serve to sharpen the contrast. But the child is confused at the thought that being "grown-up" is not something wonderful. He admires the knowledge of grown-ups which can answer all his questions. When privileged to help his father fix the washing machine, he assumes an air of dignity; that is a *man's* work. The youngster is constantly imitating adults; he acts and talks like his father and acquires many of his mannerisms. Yet the child is told that to be an adult is not something wonderful, and he is puzzled.

It is the child who is right and the adult who is wrong. To be an adult is to possess the fullness of human life, and the child instinctively realizes it. The difficulty lies in this: human life is a paradoxical blend of seeking happiness and finding sorrow, of offering love and being ignored, of wanting the good and accomplishing the evil. All too often for adults, the eagerness of youth is tripped upon the hard rocks of suffering, sorrow and moral wrong.

But life should not culminate in discouraged frustration. The fullness of human life, as the child rightly senses, is something wonderful. But the answer to the problem of how this can be accomplished cannot come from man himself. He must seek help from another. In placing Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island, only Daniel Dafoe knew what the outcome would be. The successful ending of any story is foreseen perfectly only by the author. So also the full story of mankind is known only to the Author of life. The answer to the mystery of life can only come from God.

God's answer is given in His Son. "God, who, at sundry times and in diverse manners, spoke in times past to the fathers by the prophets, last of all, in these days hath spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1-2). The answer especially appears on the Cross. Standing before the Cross and peering into the opened Heart of Christ, man sees suffering and its cause which is sin. Man can here penetrate more deeply into the mystery of sin and recognize it for what it

is, an attack upon God. Suffering is then seen to be the punishment for sin. Yet the answer to the mystery of life is still not complete. Human life is more than a mystery of evil; it is a mystery of love. In the pierced Heart, man sees the Love which created him, and the Love which is now in the agonizing birth-pangs of re-creating him. Man sees the Love which is the source of all his aspirations and which alone can answer them. The Cross alone is the answer to the riddle of life and of human existence. Christ Crucified is a portrait of love, to be appreciated by those who recognize the brush strokes of the Master, and who have their faculties attuned to His words.

The clearest insight into the Heart of Christ is gained through the words of God. Each of the four Evangelists describe the Passion and the accompanying events. The Gospel reveals the whole story: the Discourse after the Last Supper proves the depths of Christ's love for men; the Agony shows the depths of torment and full freedom of spirit with which Christ embraced the Cross at the will of His Father; detailed accounts are given of the arrest, trial, scourging, crowning with thorns, on up to the climax of "It is consummated." Yet the word of God is not restricted to the New Testament. "Man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). Man can also learn of Christ in the Old Testament. There is one passage which so captures the motive and spirit of the crucifixion that it has been called "the Fifth Passion." The portrait of the Heart of Christ can readily be traced out in the prophetic brush-strokes of Isaias' fourth "Servant of Jahweh" canticle. Here again we find love of His fellow men prompting Christ to offer Himself freely for their sins.

A letter from home may contain nothing radically new. But there may be a slight change in viewpoint or turn of phrase that reveal new features in those we love. The same is true of the "Servant of Jahweh" portrait by Isaias. In these sixteen verses, no new revelation is given, yet, written eight centuries before the event, the inspired words shift the viewpoint and give a fresh look at this Heart of Infinite Love. This portrait by Isaias reveals again God's answer to the mystery of life. Not only does man here see the depths of sorrow and the horror of sin. Looking beyond these into the motive of it all, man can stand with the Roman soldiers and look on Him Whom they have pierced. Not looking now with idle curiosity but with loving docility, man learns what love is, what the meaning of life is; he learns the answer to the mystery of life in the portrait of love dying on the Cross. For in Isaias' portrait, we

can study Christ, WHO gives the answer to the mystery of life. We can learn WHAT His love has led Him to do for us; we can see HOW and WHY He did it.

WHO IS HE?

He is *my servant*,¹ the servant of the most high God. He is *my just servant* who *shall justify many*. Long centuries have passed since the promise to Adam of a redeemer, since its renewal to Abraham in the establishment of the Covenant wherein "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3), since the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. "And Sion said: The Lord hath forsaken me, and the Lord hath forgotten me" (Isaias 49:14). These centuries are centuries of hopelessness, of sin, of "playing the harlot" (Osee 4:15), but above all they are centuries of thirsting expectation. "Give ear, O thou that rulest Israel . . . stir up thy might, and come to save us . . . O God of hosts, convert us, and show us thy face, and we shall be saved" (Ps. 79:4-8). He is *as a root out of a thirsty ground*. It is reminiscent of another great Isaian prophecy: "There shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a power shall rise up out of his root" (Isaias 11:1). The mother is prepared, the Messiah born. For the succeeding thirty years of the hidden life, under the guidance of His parents and the hovering Spirit, *he shall grow up as a tender plant before him*.

Yet this chosen one has a startling appearance in this portrait. *There is no beauty in him, nor comeliness; he is despised*. How could this be? *We have seen him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of him*. Man looks on Him to Whom St. Augustine could pray, "Come, Lord, work upon us, call us back, set us on fire and clasp us close, be fragrant to us, draw us to Thy loveliness . . ." ² But man can find no reason why *he should be desirous of him*. The blindness of man sees only the external ugliness. *We thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted*. Only the good, the true and the beautiful appeal to the nobility of man. He wants no part of base and ugly suffering. Nor does he pause to consider the source of the ugliness. He sees only *the most object of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity, and*

¹ Because of their frequency and primacy in this portrait, all the quotations from the "Servant of Jahweh" section (Isaias 52:13-53:12) will be indicated simply by italics. The phrases quoted will not necessarily follow the order in which they were written by Isaias.

² *Confessions of St. Augustine*, transl. by Frank Sheed, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1943, p. 163.

he shudders in horror. A more penetrating look at the portrait might reveal to him the source of the horror and ugliness.

WHAT HAS HE DONE?

He Who is the saviour, the long-awaited deliverer, is rejected by His Chosen People. They do not believe. *Who hath believed our report?* St. John, in his Gospel, after telling of the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, quotes this verse and notes sadly, "And whereas he had done so many miracles before them, they believed not in him: that the saying of Isaias might be fulfilled . . ." (Jn. 12:37-38). This was nothing new in Jewish history. The Lord Himself had once said to Moses, "How long will this people detract me? how long will they not believe me for all the signs which I have wrought before them?" (Numbers 14:11). They wanted God, and they wanted the Messiah, but on their own terms. Their attitude is summed up in *we esteemed him not*. He Who gave them bread to eat and raised their dead to life is *wounded, bruised, despised*. He is *reputed with the wicked*.

The horror in this portrait is not generated by the personality of the one portrayed. The horror and ugliness have been heaped on Him by others. He came to give truth, but truth was not wanted. He came to replace earthly ideals with the divine ideal. He came to expose the shallowness of all earthly satisfactions and to propose instead the deep fulfillment of peace with God. But the choice of that fulfillment entailed the loss of things long possessed. Men considered it far better that the one should die rather than the whole nation perish (cf. Jn. 11:50). *He is cut out of the land of the living. He shall be led as a sheep to the slaughter*. By the unholy of trials He is condemned to die a criminal's death; *he shall give the ungodly for his burial*. In the slaying of Him Who is God, in the rejection of His love, man learns the horror of sin. For the ugliness and horror of the Cross lie not in the person on the Cross, but in sin. Man cannot turn from the horror as though it were foreign to him; it is caused by him, it is all his very own. The one on the Cross is innocence personified. Though the horror of sin sweeps over and rips through Him, He Himself is innocent. *He hath done no iniquity, neither was there deceit in his mouth*.

What has He actually done? *He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows*. He "who knew no sin" (II Cor. 5:21) *hath borne the sins of many*. Here we begin to see that the Cross does more than merely express the horror of sin. The Old Law did this; "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). Sin was re-

vealed in the Law. Love is revealed on the Cross. *He shall lay down his life for sin.* His love overcomes man's rejection by taking its burden on Himself. The greatness of His love is apparent in its cost to Himself, for *his soul hath laboured.* Nor is He merely passive. Having taken sin on Himself, having been "made sin for us" (II Cor. 5:21), He is a holocaust, a sacrifice to God. He offers Himself. It is He Himself that *hath delivered his soul unto death.*

HOW HAS HE DONE IT?

He has done all this freely, which is a sure sign of love. *He shall lay down his life for sin.* Christ Himself uses these very words: "I lay down my life . . . No man taketh it from me: but I lay it down of myself" (Jn. 10:17-18). Though killed by others and *cut off out of the land of the living*, yet it is by His own consent. He would not ask for "twelve legions of angels" (Mt. 26:53). *He was offered because it was his own will.*³

And he did it silently, which is the way of love. *He shall not open his mouth.* He had begun His life in silence: "He shall come down like rain upon fleece, and as showers falling gently upon the earth" (Ps. 71:6). It would end in the same way. Always "Meek and humble of heart" (Mt. 11:29), *he shall be dumb as a lamb before his shearer.* He is "the lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world" (Jn. 1:29). To the calumnies, jibes, mockeries of those who bruised Him, *he opened not his mouth.*

WHY DID HE DO THIS?

We all like sheep have gone astray. It is man who is at the bottom of all this. *Everyone hath turned aside into his own path.* Not only the Jews, but all men have sinned. The Heart of Christ is weighted with *our burden.* *He hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows.* *The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* He carries our burden, and our burden is sin. *He shall bear their iniquities.* *He was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins.* *For the wickedness of my people have I struck him.*

³ The phrase "because it was his own will" does not seem to have come from the inspired hand of Isaiah. According to scholars, this verse in Hebrew reads, "He was harshly treated but humbled himself" (*A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, p. 568; New York, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1953). "But the Vulgate interpretation, sanctified by the constant use of the Church, and suggested later in this prophecy by the words 'He hath delivered his soul unto death,' show us Christ's free choice of death as the essential act of this sacrifice" (*Lent*, by Conrad Pepler, O.P.; B. Herder Book Co., 1950, p. 347).

The source of His bruises is ourselves and our sins; from these sources alone erupted the torrent of sorrow and anguish that afflicted Him. But they are not the ultimate reasons why He so suffered and offered Himself. The portrait of Isaias shows the ultimate "why" of the Passion to be threefold: our redemption, Christ's own glory, and the glory of God.

FOR OUR REDEMPTION

*He was bruised for our sins, and
by his bruises we are healed.* It is

here that love fully appears. He takes our sins on Himself to overcome our sins. He accepts the burden of our rejection of His love in order to overcome our rejection. He calls man back by using the very thing by which man departs from Him. The contrast is clear-cut, frighteningly so, except that it is mercy and love that is calling. "Abyss calls unto abyss" (Ps. 41:8). The abyss of His love summons man forth from the abysmal depths of sin. He seeks not justice, not destruction, *he hath prayed for the transgressors*. He seeks mercy and peace. *The chastisement of our peace was upon him*. He calls man back to a level with Himself. *My just servant shall justify many*. In grasping the tremendousness of His mercy and love, man contacts the goodness of his God.

A child knows his mother's wonderfulness from the way she so constantly cares for his every need. Man knows God's wonderfulness from the way He has responded to man's need. When the Jews complained, "The Lord hath forsaken me, and the Lord hath forgotten me," God replied, "Can a woman forget her infant, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? and if she should forget, yet will not I forget thee" (Isaias 49: 14,15). He did not forget. He did not send an angel to save us, He came Himself. He came to those who *esteemed him not*. He came to bear the brunt of our wickedness and to conquer it. He proved by every deed that the infinite good is not simply an abstract speculation of some philosophers, but is an intimately personal God Who takes on Himself man's rejection of Himself, bears its full malice, and conquers it.

Christ willingly chose death rather than the loss of our friendship. Stooping down to sinful man, He rips aside the barrier of self-love with the fierce violence of love and exposes a Heart of love. His love affects the depths of every man, destroying, cleansing, ennobling, and then offers itself. A love so strong, a love so free, a love that is not seeking but giving, not profiting but spending at such cost to self, such love is a full and glorious revelation of what God is in Himself. He is Love. And He came to give Himself to us.

He is *our* good. He could not prove it more convincingly. Henceforth the vibrant song of love wings its way through all the world. The Old Testament was spoken to the Jews; the New Testament is given to all. *They that heard not have beheld His love. They to whom it was not told of him have seen.* In Him all the nations of the earth are healed. *He was bruised for our sins, and by his bruises we are healed.* And being healed, we are made whole; and made whole, we love in return. For the only adequate reply to love is love.

FOR CHRIST The goal of the Passion is the Redemption, the return of man to a life with God—loved by God and loving God. This goal is caught up into another. The Passion is for the glory of Christ. *Behold my servant shall understand. He shall be exceeding high.* "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). *Because his soul hath laboured, he shall see and be filled.* All whom he has redeemed shall be his. *If he shall lay down his life for sin, he shall see a long-lived seed. Therefore will I distribute to him very many.* The exultant hymn of heaven, sung by all his seed, will be, "The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power, and divinity, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and benediction" (Apoc. 5:12). When time shall be no more, *he shall be exalted and extolled.*

FOR GOD The author of the whole plan is God. The ultimate glory is His. It is God's servant, *my servant*, who has accomplished this wondrous work. It is God's Will that has affected it. *The Lord was pleased to bruise him in infirmity. The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He is as one struck by God and afflicted.* The Jews and Romans are, of course, the ones responsible for the crucifixion. But they acted under the providence of God, Who willed by the death of His servant to redeem all men. "Jesus Christ . . . this same being delivered up, by the determinate counsel and for knowledge of God, you by the hands of wicked men have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:22-23). God's power and wisdom draw good out of evil and work the great paradox of the Cross: "unto the Jews . . . a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness: but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:23-24). It is all to His glory.

Such then is the portrait of love, drawn by the Holy Spirit using the brush of Isaiahs. The disillusionment of the adult gives way before it to the eager hope of the child. Even though sorrow, suffering and difficulties remain, the answer to the mystery

of human life has been given. They find their explanation on the Cross. Man learns that all suffering is a consequence of sin. Man also learns from the pierced Heart that, by suffering with Christ, he shares in the noblest effort and ideal on earth—the redemption of all mankind. He learns too that suffering with Christ is the highest expression of love that can be given to the Father. Nor does this make the Christian life depressing or gloomy; on the contrary, it takes the gloom out of human life by offering a divinely founded incentive for willingly accepting things otherwise oppressive. Love makes a joy of sacrifice.

That sin in the portrait is unfortunate. Yet it is a sure guarantee that the picture is realistic. The Holy Spirit sketched no dream-world Utopia. To enter the gloriously real order of divine love, man must accept Christ Crucified; to appreciate the Crucified, man must admit the reality of sin. It is a bit humiliating that man's noblest action, love of Christ, hinges on admittance of his own baseness. But "the base things of this world, and the things that are contemptible, hath God chosen" (I Cor. 1:30). These key features of the Christian life are crisply epitomized by St. Louis-Marie de Montfort: "Never the Cross without Jesus, nor Jesus without the Cross."⁴

As Isaias' portrait of this Man of Sorrow unfolds before us, we see Him *led as a sheep to the slaughter*, we see Innocence Itself befouled with the stain of our sins. There grows a realization of the horror of sin and of the love of Christ. The more wonderful Christ is seen to be, the more horrible becomes sin, for it is an attack on Him. The more horrible sin appears, the more immeasurable is the love of Christ, for it accepted this attack from us and turned it to our advantage. Love shouldered the burden of our sins in order to restore us to Himself and, with Him, to God. More mindful of us than the most loving mother is of her child, God did not forget us in our hour of need. His tender mercy and His all-powerful love prompted Him to act in our behalf. He revealed His love and gave His love from the Cross.

And he shall grow up as a tender plant before him . . . despised and the most abject of men . . . all we like sheep have gone astray . . . he was wounded for our iniquities, he was bruised for our sins, and by his bruises we are healed . . . if he shall lay down his life for sin, he shall see a long-lived seed . . . behold my servant shall understand, he shall be exalted, and extolled, and shall be exceeding high.

⁴ *The Love of the Eternal Wisdom*, by St. Louis-Marie de Montfort, transl. by A. Somers, S.M.M., The Peter Reilly Company, Philadelphia, 1955, p. 143.