

EASTER DAY

Christians have often found it difficult to accept the stark reality of the death of Christ. His death was dramatic and agonising, yet he died, his earthly existence was terminated, in the same way that ours also will be. His was a human death like any other. His suffering and pain was real. His fear and despair were real. In the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as told in Luke's Gospel, Christ shrinks from death and fears it. Luke describes his torment:- "being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground". (Luke 22:44) This is picture of a human being in great fear. And also in Matthew's account of the death of Christ we are given those words of utter dereliction from the lips of Jesus: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In death he experienced such loneliness that he feared that even God himself had deserted him.

In the Gospel of John however, this realism seemed to be played down. John, writing some 20 or 30 years later, portrays a Christ who is in some ways detached from the real suffering. In the Garden of Gethsemane there is no anguish, no fear, but instead a Jesus who knew everything which was about to happen and appears to be in control of events. When Peter attacks the servant of the high priest with a sword, Jesus said to Peter "Put your sword back in its place. Do you not think that I will drink of my Father's cup of suffering?" The desperate suffering has been played down. And again, John's account of the death of Jesus is almost serene in

comparison with the other Gospel writers. No cry of dereliction or despair but simply:- "He bowed his head and died". One is almost tempted to ask "is this the same Jesus as he who was portrayed by Matthew, Mark & Luke?"

One possible explanation for this is that in his eagerness to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah, the divine Son of God, John tended to underplay the fact that Jesus was also fully human. If Jesus was God in the flesh as it were, how could God suffer?

The same tendency arises in talking about the Easter experience. In our eagerness to celebrate and proclaim the Risen and triumphant Lord, we tend to underplay the seriousness of Good Friday. We hear on Good Friday disc jockeys say "have a great time, enjoy yourself, its Easter time!" On television the other day someone was encouraging us all to attend a great pop festival on Good Friday! My reaction to that was to think to myself - now hang on, do you realise that Easter is quite meaningless without the cross? I might have misjudged him - in which case I'm sorry, but what are we celebrating at Easter time if it is not the Resurrection of one who suffered all the fear and loneliness and pain and despair that human beings have to face. I felt like singing the lament "were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

The point is this, if we fail to realise the stark truth of the suffering Messiah, we are in grave danger of trivialising our faith and of trivialising life itself. The resurrection was not simply a trick with bones or a magic feat with tombstones. Christianity is not superstitious sensationalism - or it should not be. St. Paul was at great pains to argue that the Resurrection of Christ was in some profound

sense our resurrection also. "If you have been raised with Christ", he says, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." Colossians 3. Paul defines the Christian life as not only a rising life - a resurrection life - but also a dying life. Christians are raised, yes, but for suffering. The Christian life moves between the poles of crucifixion and resurrection. Some people give the impression that once you become converted to Christianity, all your problems are solved. No more anxiety, no more doubt, no more money problems, no more health problems even. Others give the impression that Christianity is about bearing a cross, bearing the burdens of others, denouncing all the pleasures of this world, and being a continuous pain in the neck. I don't believe that either attitude is truly Christian. The Christian life is living by them both. This is difficult. In some ways it's easier to live by resurrection alone, or even by the crucifixion alone, than by living in the tension between them.

Christians live by the Resurrection, yes, and this can give us a poise and serenity which is often the admiration of those who cannot believe. But such serenity is not an insensitive aloofness. If it is a rising life it is also a dying life, and this means a constant re-entry into those dark regions which have been overcome in the resurrection but which still exercise a painful influence. Perhaps this re-entry means standing alongside those who are held back from belief by a scepticism born of suffering. An essential part of the ministry of the Christian life is believing for those who don't believe, praying for those who cannot pray, and worshipping for those who cannot

worship. This is something of what living by both resurrection and crucifixion means. Thanks be to God.

AMEN