

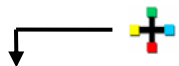


The Wretchedness and Greatness of the Church

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

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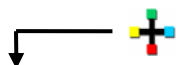


* *The Sermon on St. Mark 8: 27-35, preached at the United service in All Saints Cathedral, Allahabad, during the Triennial meeting of the N.C.C.*

'Who do men say that I am?' John, Elijah, one of the prophets, one of a well-known class which we call 'religious leaders', 'men of God.' We have had them before and we shall have them again - Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Buddha, Sankaracharya, Mohamet - one of that category. That's the natural man's answer to the question 'Who is Jesus?' When we refuse to accept it, we seem to the natural man to be guilty of blind bigotry, to be guilty of the fatuous ignorance of the frog which thinks that its pond is the ocean.

But our refusal to accept it does not rest upon our authority; it rests upon His. 'Who say ye that I am?' He asks, and the answer which he accepts is 'Thou art the Christ.' And 'Christ' means king, the anointed sovereign Lord who is to rule the world, who is to sit at God's right hand till every foe submits, whose Name is above every other name, to whom every knee shall bow, whom every tongue shall confess as Lord. 'Thou art the Christ' - that confession is not the verdict of the natural man; it is the God-given truth. 'Flesh and blood have not revealed it to you, but my Father in Heaven.' It is on the authority of Jesus that we refuse to place Him in the gallery of great religious leaders, to treat Him as one of the prophets, one of the revelations, one of the incarnations. He is the Christ - the King. The figure of Jesus which some of our non-Christian friends would gladly include in their pantheon is not the Jesus who actually lived here on earth. It is, one must say it plainly, a myth, a construct of the imagination. The only Jesus for whose existence we have any evidence is the Jesus who won from men this confession: 'Thou art the Christ'.

'The great contribution of the Hebrews to religion', says John MacMurray, 'is that they abolished it.' That sentence is more

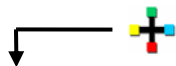


than a daring, paradox. Of our Lord Himself it is the sober truth. His own parable of the husbandmen says it as plainly as it can be said. God has sent many servants into the world, many messengers to remind men of their duty to Him. But the series does not go on indefinitely. It ends in a Son. Not a servant, but a Son, the Christ the Son of the living God, the One who both by character and by office is absolutely empowered and authorised to represent God's kingly rule on earth. There the series ends. The Christ has come. There is only one thing to be done - and that is to obey Him.

II

In the same hour that the disciples learned to call Him Lord, Jesus began to teach them the word 'Cross'. 'He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer'. These two things belong together - the title of the Christ and the destiny of the Cross. For consider. If a new teacher arises, his teaching may be discussed, criticised, accepted, amended, or corrected. His teaching will become part of the general stream of culture, which will flow on with - perhaps - new eddies and swirls, but with no decisive break. A new guru, a new prophet, is in the same situation. But if a new claim to kingship arises, then there is a different situation. A claim to kingship is either lawful or it is treason. There is no middle way. Either it must prevail, or it must be destroyed. In any case there will be a battle and it must be fought to a finish. That battle was the Cross. Not with the weapons of this world, but, with the wholly spiritual weapons of love and obedience, Christ faced and overcame the prince of this world, defeating every power of hate and lust and falsehood by the pure self-offering of the obedience of the beloved Son to His Father. There was the decisive victory for Christ's kingdom. And that is why, in the very hour when the disciples learn to confess Him King, He begins to teach them what His kingship will mean.

Peter cannot bear this teaching. 'God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you,' he says - according to St. Matthew's Gospel. To be King must mean to be successful, to be conqueror, to have the world at one's feet. To be crucified means to be defeated, to be rejected, to be in the most absolute sense a failure. How can you possibly bring together these two ideas - Christ and

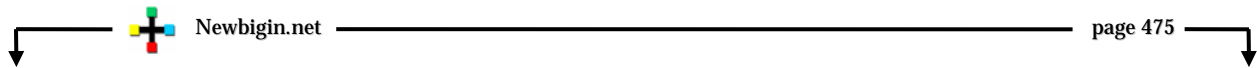


Cross? God forbid Lord. Don't let us hear any more of this defeatism. But Jesus answered 'Get behind me Satan: you are not on God's side but on men's'. Peter the confessor, is at the same time Peter the enemy of God.

It is often said of us that we are ordinary people making extraordinary claims. The paradox needs to be put more sharply, as it is in the title of today's readings according to the CSI Lectionary - 'The Wretchedness and Greatness of the Church'. The claim we have to make is nothing less than the absolute and unique sovereignty of Jesus Christ over all things in heaven and earth. We make that claim because we must, because He will not let us claim anything less. But of ourselves, what shall we say? Peter who made this confession had to be rebuked in the next breath as an emissary of Satan. Why? Because he took Christ's kingship to mean success, victory, security in terms of this world. And which of us, and which of our Churches, has not been guilty of this reversal of our Lord's intention? Which of us had not been guilty of trying to conduct Christ's warfare with the weapons of the flesh? If some of our sins in this respect have recently been exposed, exaggerated, and condemned by unfriendly critics, shall we not accept it humbly as a rebuke from Christ Himself? There was a judge who became aware of the fact that this Christian claim was a total one and might have political implications. He instituted an enquiry, and in the course of it he put the direct question to the principal Witness: 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus - always the Good Shepherd caring for every single sheep put a question to find out whether Pilate's enquiry arose from dawning faith or from mere bazaar rumour: 'Do you say this of your own accord or

did others say it to you about me?' When the answer showed that there was no free course for faith in him, Jesus, told Pilate 'My kingship is not of this world: if it were, my servants would fight... but my kingship is not from this world.' Again the puzzled magistrate asks Him: 'So you are a king?' and Jesus answers: 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.'

He is a king - the King: He will accept no lesser title. His servants cannot suppress that claim, or tone it down. He is King - Christ the Son of the living God. But He will impose His claim on no man by the methods of this world - by force, by bribery,

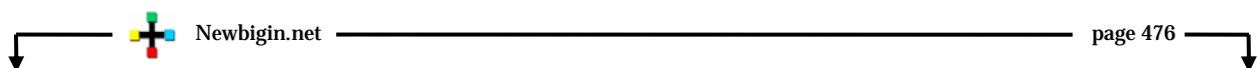


by high-powered propaganda, by anything which robs men - each man - of the right and privilege of being led to God by Christ Himself. 'For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.' That and that alone, is the manner of His Kingly rule. His servants dare not either suppress His claim to sovereignty, or choose other weapons than He chose for enforcing it. If they do so, they will receive not merely the rebuke of men, but the much more terrible rebuke of Christ 'Get behind me Satan; you are not on the side of God but of men.' Let us for the moment forget what Men say of our Churches' missionary work, whether by way of praise or of blame. Let us hear only what our Lord says to our consciences both about the nature of His claim and about the methods by which it is to be commended to men. And let us hear what the greatest of missionaries has to say about it, in the passage which forms the epistle for the day: 'No other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay stubble - each man's work will become manifest; for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.' There may be much in our work which, by the standards of a human empire is dazzlingly impressive. Our access to great material resources makes it possible to accomplish these things. But by the standard of the empire of Christ our building with these things may be wood, hay, stubble. Let each man take care how he builds.

III

Not content with a severe rebuke to Peter, our Lord calls together all the disciples and tells them in the most definite terms that the Cross is not only His own destiny, but the destiny of all who would follow Him. 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it.

The way of the master must also be the way of the disciple. We cannot follow Him except - by following Him! That means - for every disciple 'and for the Church' as a whole - deny self,



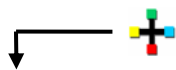
take up the Cross. What do these phrases mean in practice for us?

They mean firstly the daily, definite, resolute exercise of saying No to self; of saying in every situation 'Not my will, but Thine be done' and saying it with joy. That applies to each of us in the countless circumstances of our individual lives. Sometimes that act is open to the knowledge of others; more often it is secret and known only to God. And it applies equally to our Churches. Churches are capable of developing a corporate egotism of which individual Christians would be ashamed: To deny self is harder for a Church than for an individual, harder but not less necessary.

It applies to that final act of self-denial which a Church is called upon to make when God summons it to join with others in surrendering its separate existence to become one with others of His people in a united Church. That must always be costly. Let us not pretend otherwise. But the paying of that cost maybe part of what is involved in following Christ. And when we pay it we find that the promise is fulfilled: 'Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's shall save it.'

To take up the Cross means at least this - that as Christ was numbered with the transgressors for our sake, we are willing to be numbered with the transgressors for His. It means that we are willing joyfully to bear the share of pain and shame and trouble that comes to us through the sin of others; bear it not merely as a trial but as a privilege, as the great and noble bore the emblems of sovereignty in the Queen's Coronation procession. Again that applies to the Church and to us as individuals. To those of us who have special responsibilities in the Church I think there is a special word here. We often speak in censorious and defeatist language about the sins of our fellow-Christians. Is it not part of our privilege as we follow Jesus in His coronation procession, to bear these sins in our hearts - not openly but secretly - in a constant prayer of penitence and intercession? Not to stand above our brethren in judgment, but to stand beside them in penitence and intercession, so that we may be truly ministers of Him who by His sufferings has borne our sins and has called us to be in Him a great High Priesthood to bear the sin of the world?

Above all, to take up the Cross means to trust God absolutely and without reserve. That is what Christ did on Calvary. He committed all things absolutely and without reserve to the



Father, seeking no kind of success in the terms of the world; but leaving it to the Father alone to vindicate Him in His own time and way. That is what we are called to do. The claim we must make for Christ is absolute; He is the King, and He sits at God's right hand until all things are put under His feet. But for ourselves we can claim no security or privilege, no worldly success or impressiveness, nothing whatever except the right to follow Him in denying self, in taking up the Cross, and in committing all things into the hands of the Father whose will it is to give us the Kingdom.

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