



This Is The Turning-Point Of History

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In last month's piece I asked 'Is anyone in charge?' and answered with a Christian doctrine of God's providence. But this doctrine seems to be contradicted by experience. The world is full of abominable wickedness. We ask 'How can God allow things to go on like this?'

It would be better to re-phrase the question: 'Why did God not strike me dead before I did that thing of which I am ashamed?' We answer, 'Because God is merciful'. But what about God's justice?

What would happen to a society where criminals were never caught and punished, to a hospital where lazy incompetence was never checked? The doctors hope the management will be merciful; the damaged patients hope they will be just. How can God be both merciful and just?

The Old Testament unfolds the story of God's agony as love and wrath struggle within him (see e.g. Hosea 11). There is a burning anger against our injustice and yet a love that will not let us go. As we read on, we see more and more clearly that the wounds of our wickedness are in the heart of God.

We are prepared for the moment when these wounds must become visible in the body of a man like us. Words, even God's words, were not enough. His total commitment to us had to be embodied in his own presence with us. It could not be just a doctrine; it had to be a real human life and a human death. It had to be part of history.

No words can express the full meaning of the death of Jesus, though millions have been written in the attempt. The New Testament uses many analogies. The death of Jesus is like the ransom paid to redeem a slave. It is the sacrifice made by a sinner to God who is offended, yet it is God who offers the sacrifice. It is God's judgment on sin, and yet it is God who bears the judgment. It is the defeat of Satan and the victory of God's kingly rule. It is the final proof of God's love. Very simply and personally it is 'The Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me'.

The one of whom these are spoken is the risen Jesus. If the wounded body had remained to moulder in the grave there would have been no story to tell. There were already plenty of failed messiahs, plenty of futile protests against the wickedness of the world. Christian faith was born and lives because Jesus was raised from death by the power of God who is in charge. This is the turning-point of history.

There is no analogy except the creation itself. Modern cosmology has probed the history of creation back to a few fractions of a second from the primal explosion. Beyond that point the laws of physics do not apply. We are at the boundary of human knowledge.

The resurrection of Jesus marks a comparable boundary. It is the new explosion of life which begins a new creation. Its result was a radio-active fallout of joy which was and is not lethal but life-giving. It is the birth of a new order.

It is possible to remain domesticated in the old order, where 'God' is so defined that he cannot do what the gospel says he has done. He cannot become man, suffer and die. I know that there are arguments for the existence of this 'God' but I do not find them convincing. Certainly the resurrection story makes no sense if one starts from there. The point is that if you start with the resurrection of the crucified Jesus you can begin to make sense – even joyful sense – of this (otherwise) meaningless world of sin and death.

Historians of science speak about 'paradigm shifts', fundamental changes in the framework of thought which enable you to see old things in a new and meaningful pattern. You don't reach the new paradigm by argument in terms of the old; it is a new vision from a new standpoint. Jesus – the real Jesus, God made flesh, crucified and risen – is either your starting point, the rock on which you stand to get a view of the world, or else he is a myth.

And there is no point in trying to replace the real Jesus (the only one of whom we have solid evidence) with a figure made up by taking out of the record the bits that can be domesticated in the old order. It is possible to cling to the old; it is also possible to venture out into the new open world into which the risen Jesus leads us. For 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation'.

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