

## THE PASSION

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THE Mass is constructed round the Passion of Christ. After the consecration the priest says, 'Wherefore, O Lord, we thy servants, as also thy holy people, calling to mind the blessed passion of the same Christ thy Son . . .' In every church there is at least one crucifix, every Catholic home has a crucifix in a place of honour and at the end of every rosary there hangs a crucifix. Yet so often our thoughts shy away from meditating on the Passion of Christ. The more one thinks on the Passion, especially on the crucifixion, the more unbearable does it seem to be. Nevertheless the great saints have always stressed this necessity of meditating on the Passion.

A great part of the problem of meditating on the Passion lies in the linking of this terrible unique event with our own lives. The Passion seems too overwhelmingly important to have any possible connection with our own rather prosaic existence. The following is a suggestion which may be helpful in linking up two apparently very dissimilar events, our own lives as we have to live them and Christ's Passion as he died in it.

God's timing is perfect. This simple fact is the central theme in both the Passion and our own lives; it is the link which binds our lives with that of Christ scourged, thorn-crowned and crucified. In a sense the perfection of God's timing, as shown by his Passion, strengthens, on a purely natural plane, Christ's claim to be God.

In the Passion the crucifixion was the central part and the crucifixion was the most ghastly physical torture ever devised by man. This aspect of the crucifixion has recently been brought out in an article on the Holy Shroud by Group Captain Cheshire in *Picture Post* of April 9, 1955. Cheshire writes: 'According to the whim of the executioners, the struggle of a person who is crucified will be shorter and more acute, or less acute but longer. In some cases, ropes were put round his shoulders. In others he sat on a sedile, or a kind of ledge. In all these various ways the pressure on the chest was reduced, so that the pain was less violent, but the death correspondingly prolonged—sometimes over a period of two days. It looks as if there was no support for Christ's feet,

because the Shroud shows the soles fully extended, like a ballet dancer balanced on his toes; and probably no ropes or sedile because when the soldiers came to break his legs they found him already dead. Christ, in fact, had already suffered the full measure of pain and exhaustion of which even he was capable.

'Such, in outline, is the Passion of our Lord, according to the Holy Shroud. And such is the reminder it gives us of how he loved us unto death, even the death of the cross.

'The cross is both the cruellest and most shameful death ever devised by man. Yet it was the instrument which Christ chose to redeem the world.'

Christ purposely chose to come to earth at that particular period in order to suffer this, the most agonising of all physical tortures; no other period of history would have fitted in with God's timing. Never let us forget the scourging, which, as Cheshire points out, could and often did kill a strong man, nor let us forget the crowning of thorns and the journey carrying the cross to Calvary, all integral parts of the Passion.

Christ's Passion is far wider than the purely physical. On the mental side the Passion is the culmination of a long-drawn process; from the first Christ knew what his death would be, and this knowledge, with the fear that the physical agony might prove too much even for him, must have been a far more crushing strain than any mental worries that any of us could be called upon to bear; the stakes were infinitely higher.

This foreknowledge must have increased Christ's loneliness. The disciples never seemed able to grasp what lay in store for him, even though he told them plainly enough. 'Then he took the twelve apostles aside, and warned them, Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and all that has been written about the Son of Man is to be accomplished. He will be given to the Gentiles, and mocked, and beaten, and spat upon; they will scourge him, and they will kill him; but on the third day he will rise again. They could make nothing of all this; his meaning was hidden from them, so that they could not understand what he said.' (Matt. 20, 17 and Mark 10, 32 also tell the same story.) Christ therefore could never expect sympathy from his apostles, as sympathy depends on understanding; perhaps alone St John did have some inkling of the tragedy which was to befall Christ, for Christ loved him in a way that makes one feel there was a bond of understanding between them,

a bond whose depths were revealed when on the cross Christ handed over the care of his mother to St John.

The crucial point is, however, that during those long years of mental passion Christ had no one to whom he could turn for comfort or sympathy. His followers even slept while he was in the Garden. 'Abba, Father, he said, all things are possible to thee; take away this chalice from before me; only as thy will is, not as mine is.' (Mark 14, 36.) This is the cry of a person at the end of his tether, but God's timing is perfect and the necessary strength was given.

The compassion of Christ is also shown by the timing of his death. By his crucifixion Christ virtually abolished crucifixion. To be crucified became an honour, since it recalled the death by which God had delivered the world; hence by dying for us in this way Christ spared many others in the future from suffering this ghastly torture. It was as if God had said, 'Man has devised such an unspeakably brutal death for his fellow men that the Heavens cannot bear it any longer'. Then it was that Christ volunteered to take our humanity. God's timing is perfect.

If we ever doubt the perfection of God's timing (and who does not?) we have only to meditate on the Passion to recall ourselves to sanity. If we sometimes think that the physical and mental tortures of this age are worse than history has ever known and are thus unendurable, the Passion of Christ and his foreknowledge of the Cross should help us to see things in perspective again. God's timing is perfect.



## THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE APOSTLE THROUGH PREACHING<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE apostle, at least for the thesis of this paper, is some sort of a preacher. The apostle is one who is sent by God to spread the Gospel, spread the Kingdom of God, extend the actuality of the Mystical Body; and thus he is sent to break

<sup>1</sup> The substance of a paper read to a conference of Editors of Spiritual Reviews, Cork, July, 1955.