

The Price of Christian Discipleship

"God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6: 14).

Christianity is about obligations owed to God, and the observance of the laws he has established for the conduct of individual lives. It is about our identity, that we are owned by God and have no other primary loyalties in the world. It is about the worship of God: an offering (not intended to elicit emotional satisfaction or sociability in ourselves), which is directed to the Creator of all things for his own sake. Because man is flawed, and is defined by the sinfulness of his nature, the profession of religious belief begins with repentance (cf. Mk. 1: 15) and proceeds thereafter very much against the grain. It hurts; it involves sacrifices of the things we would rather do; the priorities of our lives have to undergo radical change. Even then the new life in Christ does not release us from the baneful effects of our fallen natures: what it does is to give to each man the spiritual status of being forgiven by him. Then begins citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven, or the first stages of eternal life, a condition which starts now, whilst the believer is still in this world, still engaged with the sin which encompasses existence, a life born to misery and suffering yet touched by the splendour and joy which only they can know who are received in forgiveness by our Saviour.

What of the Christianity actually owned and declared in the modern church? It is a riot of sentiment, made to depend on the emotional needs or the social consciousness of the individual. As if in crude correspondence to the market forces which encourage modern men in selective consumerism, religious belief is presented as a set of choices, from which potential adherents may choose favourites; for the religion of our day is all about the enhancement of mankind. Here is the consecration of Humanism; religion as therapy. People go to church not in order to make an offering of time to God but for the emotional sensation apparently to be derived. This understanding of religion is centred in the person and in personal needs. Much of this neo-paganism is portentously acclaimed as concern for human welfare, now redefined as the essence of Christianity. The ethical ideas of the modern world also are not derived from recognizable philosophical systems or revealed truths: they are constructed (situation ethics) by appointees on ethical committees intended to advise governmental agencies, and operate on the understated assumption that the ethical may be recognized in whatever appears most conducive to human material welfare. It is sanctified Humanism; man and his needs has replaced God and his majesty in the centre stage of modern Christian drama.

Modern man has a great measure of difficulty in grasping the essential fact that religious belief, far from being the comforting and emollient culture of sentiment they seek, is in reality both exacting and disagreeable. It is against the corrupted nature of man to surrender to Jesus, and the love he holds out to him, to be fruitful and effective, needs to be matched by man's response. It hurts to be religious! Whoever would follow him, Christ declared, must give up even family loyalties (Mtt.10: 34-39) in order to take up the Cross.

The conception that Christianity is actually a structure of doctrines, which makes exclusive claims upon the will of the believer, is plainly incompatible with a culture, which expects religion to comprise of indiscriminate niceness. Generalities are so much more easily accepted than precise articles of belief. Authentic religious belief induces pain; true serenity, true joy, comes from obedience.

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In these words St. Paul expresses the entire essence of the Christian life as a following after Christ. "The world is crucified unto me": if following after Christ is the reciprocal love to his love, the reciprocal sacrifice to his sacrifice, then in this world it cannot but be a spiritual feat of genuine renunciation of the world in its selfishness and pride, in its desire as "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (1 Jn. 2: 16). "I am crucified unto the world": but this sacrifice cannot but be my crucifixion, for this world is not only outside of me but above all in my very self, in the old Adam in me. Its mortal struggle with the new life granted to us by Christ never ceases in our earthly sojourn.

"In the world ye shall have tribulation" (Jn. 16: 33). Anyone who would in the smallest degree follow the path of Christ, love him and give himself to him, has this tribulation, recognizes this suffering. The cross is suffering. However, through love and self-sacrifice this same tribulation is transformed into joy. It is experienced as being crucified with Christ, as accepting his cross and hence taking part in his victory. "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16: 33). The cross is joy, "and your joy no man taketh from you" (Jn. 16: 22).

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