



THE PASSION IN SAINT PAUL
Fr. Laurence Kriegshauser

We know the details of Christ's Passion because we hear the Gospel account every year on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. They are celebrated in the Stations of the Cross, in the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Rosary, in our crucifixes, in art and even film. The betrayal by Judas, the Agony in the Garden, the arrest, the false accusations, Peter's denials, the spitting, mocking and buffeting, the scourging, the crowning with thorns, the carrying of the Cross, the Crucifixion with thieves, the taunting, thirst, the apparent abandonment by God—all these are recorded in the Gospels. Saint Paul did not write a Gospel. What can he add to our understanding of the Passion of Our Lord? That is our topic this afternoon.

Although Paul may not have written a Gospel like the others, he nonetheless preached a Gospel, and we are fortunate to have his own brief summary of it. He writes to the Corinthians: "I remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast.... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve" (1 Cor 15:1-5). This Gospel has five elements which constitute the *kerygma*, the essential Christian proclamation:

Christ died
for our sins
in fulfillment of the Scriptures
he was raised
he appeared to the apostles.

Acceptance of these truths makes one a Christian. You'll recognize those five elements as the heart of the Nicene and Apostles' Creed. Paul's letters are reminders to his communities of this basic Christ-event and its implications for their lives. He will leave to others the description of the details of Christ's suffering and death; he will give us their theological and personal significance.

Early in the same letter to the Corinthians, Paul gives an even briefer summary of his Gospel. "We preach a crucified Christ," he says (1 Cor 1:23). He's contrasting his gospel with the powerful Messiah expected by the Jews and with the wisdom sought by the Greeks. Christ was weak in death, his death was foolish; yet through this weakness and foolishness God demonstrated his power and wisdom. The scandalous death of the cross wins forgiveness of sins and becomes the only way to life. "In him, through his blood," says Paul, "we gain redemption, the forgiveness of our sins" (Eph 1:7). Christ's Passion is thus God's gift to the world. Paul tells the Corinthians, "Christ our paschal Lamb has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7). As the blood of the Lamb sprinkled on the doorposts of the Jews in Egypt protected them from the angel of death who struck the firstborn sons, so the blood of the Lamb of God frees us from the punishment due our sins. That is the whole Gospel. That is why Paul can never stop preaching it. As he says



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to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2).

The Christian response to this gospel is faith. Faith says, Christ crucified and risen is Lord of the universe, and I commit myself wholly to him. For Paul that meant a share in the whole Christ, both his suffering and rising. He says, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:19-20). There are many things in that statement, and we will return to it later. Here note only that faith opens the door to our sharing in the life of Christ. Elsewhere Paul attributes this sharing in the life of Christ to baptism, which accompanies faith as its outward sign. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized in his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. [You can see why this passage from Romans is chosen as the New Testament reading at the Easter Vigil, where baptism is the way the life of the crucified and risen Christ is passed on to believers.] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:3-6). So in some way in Christ’s death we have died. What has been killed in us is the power of sin to destroy us. The root of sin has been killed in Christ. We are now called dead to sin, which means that a life is operating in us that is greater than sin. The Christians’ life on earth is henceforth a life of deepening faith in the Christ-life within him and a growing power to battle against the sinful tendencies that remain. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). This dying to sin leads to our resurrection in Christ.

Later in his career Paul will even say that we already share now in that resurrection: “You were buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God who raised him from the dead” (Col 2:12). There you see both faith and baptism working together, and also death and life. That’s what makes Paul’s letters so rich and so difficult to talk about, since any statement of his has several different aspects that need to be singled out in order to be put back together. For the moment let us note just that the death and life of Christ are both manifest together in the Christian’s life on earth. Paul will say to the Colossians, “You have died, and the life you now live is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

If baptism has transferred to us the death of Christ to sin, we will then experience that dying in daily life. Paul tells the Romans that we are sons of God and heirs with Christ, “provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom 8:17). The pattern of death and resurrection which was demonstrated in Christ has to be reproduced in every follower of Christ, every believer. “Those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom 8:29). We have to be conformed to our elder brother, Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his life.

As an example of this sharing in the passion of Christ Paul presents his own life in the service of the Gospel. As he says to the Corinthians, “We are afflicted in every way,



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but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies [there you have the “participated Passion”]. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh” (2 Cor 4:8-11). Note how the sharing in the crucifixion of Christ is but one side of the coin of which the other side is the triumph of Christ. You cannot have one without the other. Yet the image of the coin suggests that the death and the life are equal, when in fact one is swallowed up in the other. As Paul puts it, “This present slight affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison... , for visible things last only for a time, and the invisible things are eternal” (2 Cor 4:17-18). The passion of Christ is a gift to us that took away our sin. When it is received by us and allowed to reproduce itself in us, we become lifted from our earthbound way of life and partake in a divine life that will flower in heaven. The Christian lives the paschal mystery, the mystery of dying and rising in Christ.

In place of details about the Passion of Christ, Paul gives details about the Passion of the Christian. He likes to use himself as an example: “As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich, as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:4-10). There are several things to note about this passage. Along with the catalogue of his physical sufferings, Paul lists the virtues by which he bears them: “purity, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love,” and so forth. To share in the Passion means to share it with the power of Christ, not by one’s own strength. Second, his ongoing suffering is accompanied by joy: the two go together. That’s another example of a gospel that transcends human wisdom and human strength. Third, Paul’s sufferings like those of Jesus are fruitful for others: as poor he makes others rich. Paul had said the same thing about Jesus: “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). The death of one is life for the many.

In another catalogue of his sufferings Paul adds lashings from the Jews, shipwrecks, danger from rivers, from robbers, from Jews and Gentiles, from false brethren, sleepless nights, cold, and his daily anxiety for all the churches (cf. 2 Cor 11:24-28). He actually boasts of these experiences because they prove his union with Christ and therefore his resurrection with Christ. “Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14). He boasts of the power of the Lord which has seen him through all these hardships. They have taught him that nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ (cf. Rom 8:39). They are ways of showing love for the brothers for whom Christ died. When he tells the Corinthians “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1), he is speaking specifically about not insisting on his own rights but making himself



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the servant of all, becoming weak with the weak, strong with the strong, sacrificing his own privileges for what is good for others. It is faith in the Christ life within us and hope in the resurrection that makes these sacrifices possible. As Paul writes to the Philippians, “All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead” (Phil 3:10-11). His enthusiasm can only be explained by his eagerness to have eternal life with Christ.

That brings us to the great passage in which Paul speaks of the “self-emptying” of Christ. He cites an early Christian hymn which tells how Christ’s status was divine, yet he didn’t cling to his divine prerogatives but emptied himself to become as men are, even to suffering death, death on a cross. For that reason God exalted him high above all angels and gave him the name above every other name, so that every knee in heaven and earth should bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. Phil 2:6-11). What is the name above heaven and earth that he was given? It was the name Yahweh, the personal name of Israel’s God, the name which is translated in Greek as *kyrios*, Lord. He was Yahweh before he became man, but now it is a crucified humanity that has been given the name Yahweh: a man, suffered, died and risen. When we say Jesus Christ is Lord, we are saying that the one who was crucified for us is the divine person himself. A man who suffered is now Lord of the universe, seated at the right hand of his Father until the whole universe is subdued to him.

But what is interesting about this passage is the context in which Paul cites it. He is telling the Philippians that *they* must be like this Christ, imitating his self-emptying by not insisting on their own prerogatives but looking to the needs of others. “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus; though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself...,” etc. (Phil 2:3-5). You don’t have to be shipwrecked or whipped or beaten to suffer with Christ. You do it every time you give way to the needs of others. That is how we allow the Passion of Christ to become operative in us. Rooted in Christ’s love we want to put ourselves at the service of others. How many times do not married persons have to sacrifice their desires for what the spouse wants or needs. Men and women in religious communities and in every way of life have the same abundant opportunities, even as they need also to be honest about their own needs and desires.

I could only find one place where Paul alludes to a detail from Christ’s own Passion. He says to the Romans, “Christ did not think of himself: the words of scripture—the insults of those who insult you fall on me [Ps 69:10b]—apply to him” (Rom 15:3). Christ bore the insults directed to God. But even this detail of the Passion Paul cites only as an example for Christians to follow. Christians should not think of themselves but of their neighbors, for their good, to edify them (cf. Rom 15:2). Paul is interested in the Passion as it is reproduced in Christ’s members. At the moment of his conversion Paul learned from the risen Lord that the Christians he was persecuting were Christ himself: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4-5).

The theme of the Passion is everywhere in Paul. I have tried to organize his thoughts around a few points. First the crucified Christ was the essence of his preaching;



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it is what he offered the world and wanted the world to believe. Second, through his dying Christ takes away sin. Third, through baptism the believer shares in Christ's dying and rising. Fourth this conformity with Christ shows itself in bearing the trials of life with joy. Fifth, it entails sacrificing oneself for others, to build them up. Sixth, our share in the Passion contributes to the redemption of souls. Paul will say to the Colossians, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church" (Col 1:24). Christ unites himself so thoroughly to us that he makes our sufferings share in his redemptive sacrifice. The Passion of Christ is something to be reproduced in us so that his glory can also be manifest in us.

There is one final point. What was the motive that led to the Passion of Christ? Paul tells us clearly, "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). The death of his Son was the act of divine generosity that we will never fathom but simply receive with gratitude. It was love that motivated the Father's sending of his Son. It was love which the Son himself showed in dying for us, as Paul said in a passage we heard earlier: "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). This love for sinners is what converts our hearts and draws us to make a like gift of love. As Paul says, "Try to imitate God as children of his that he loves, and follow Christ by loving as he loved you, giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1-2). God's sacrificial love for us awakes in us a similar sacrificial love. Paul spells out in a human way what that love looks like: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32).

Paul teaches us about the Passion of Christ by showing how he and we live it by "dying daily" (1 Cor 15:31).