

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS

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IS IT astonishing or is it quite natural that a psychologist should speak on the significance of the Cross? Regarding our historical psychological development, it is astonishing, psychology having been a science quite separate from religion, certainly far away from theology. On the other hand, psychology being concerned with human life, with the nature and the essence of humanity, and the cross being, as we believe, the very center of the essence of history and of humanity itself, it is, then, quite natural that psychology and religion coincide. The deeper each digs, the more they reach the core of truth — the closer they are together.

Theology and psychology both are concerned about the essence of human life. However, I should not speak about the theological or metaphysical aspect of Golgotha. I should limit myself, being a psychologist, to the significance of the Cross to our present day human life. And there is no question that it is the paradox of the Cross that strikes us.

PARADOX: FAILURE AND VICTORY

The deepest low point of a life, the complete failure of the career of a great prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, turns out to be the victory, the very climax of the work of the Son of God. This is so paradoxical that the ordinary grasp of the human mind simply cannot reach it, cannot understand it. It has been restated many times in different words, and still it remains a mystery. St. Paul's formula, "Loss is gain,"—the more we lose on the side of human values, the more we gain on the side of spiritual values, might be one of the most valuable formulations. But it's not the only one. That those who want to preserve their lives are going to lose them and those who are willing to lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven will gain their lives is another formulation of the same paradox which may be even more useful. But how can we, in our everyday life, in our needs and sufferings and wants, make use of all this — if we can make use of it at all? This is the problem of psychology.

So let me talk about the use, the helpfulness, of the Cross — the story, the idea, the experience of the Cross in our lives. First, let me say there is a gap which almost threatens to destroy the value and the usefulness of the Cross. This gap opens up in the fact that our suffering, the crosses that we bear, that we know in our own private life, in the lives of our fellow men, and even in the lives of nations, are of a different sort from that of Jesus. In the gospel, it is stated quite clearly that what Jesus did was of his own free will. When he was crucified, it was his doing. It was not his guilt — he was not punished, he did it voluntarily. There was nothing in his former life causing or justifying his crucifixion. He didn't do wrong.

Suffering for Wrong-doing

But we are caught in some kind of suffering which almost always can be traced to some wrong that we did. The large part of our individual cross is due to our own short-comings and to our own deficiencies. Psychology, modern psychology, knows a lot about this connection between cause and effect. If someone suffers, the results of his open or secret sins, then we might consider his suffering a cross, but he should not compare it with the Cross of Golgotha, should he? His case is so different, it's almost the opposite, because this sufferer gets what he deserves, just as the two thieves did who were crucified beside Jesus.

So if we want to identify ourselves with some one on the cross, we should identify ourselves with the thieves and not with Christ. If we consider this the real value of the crucifixion of Christ and his resurrection, it seems to be lost as far as our personal experiences are concerned. The divine nature of Christ and what he did for mankind seem to separate him so definitely from us. He is so far away, so high above us, that we cannot even think of what he did and what he went through, comparing it with what we are suffering and what we might do or not do.

Suffering: Rebel or Repent?

However, there is a point that helps us to bridge the gap. It is the above-mentioned two thieves. Remember one of them remained rebellious and stubborn, and he died eventually in rebellion. The other repented, and he died in some kind of hope; at least, in some kind of positive attitude. Thus we may see that there are steps to bridge over the gap. Here is Christ in the center. Here is a crucified thief who turns around, repents, at the very last moment, and is saved. There is a bridge to our human experience, as it were. It is a bridge between metaphysics and psychology. Many of our sufferings can be traced to our own doings, more than we think. Some people may suffer greatly and think, "It's unjust." They may rebel against it, saying that they do not deserve it, they did not bring it on, they did not cause it by their actions. But they did! It takes a psychologist sometimes, with the microscope of an expert, to see clearly the why and how of the person's

suffering. Some things done twenty or thirty years ago bring on the suffering that hits him much later.

And still, in spite of all our microscopes, there remain many people who evidently suffer and suffer greatly, deeply, without having brought it on themselves by their own acts. Sometimes we realize the parent or grandparent did something wrong. And the result hits the child — still cause and effect. But regarding our individualistic view of life, it looks unjust, doesn't it?

Suffering: Remote Causes

One of the great examples is the suffering of the Russian aristocracy in 1917, 1918, 1920. Some of those Russian aristocrats might have been bad people. Yes. But on the whole, they were not worse than we are. If you know Russians, you probably love them. They are good people. They are never on time. They have no sense of time. They make mistakes here and there. They are too often drunk and what not! But they are not worse, nor better than we ordinary people. And many hundreds and thousands of them were shot during the years of the civil war in Russia. Not because of what they did. If you look for cause and effect, you have to go back farther. Not what they did brought on their suffering, but what their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents did. And this is another bridge, a more modern one, a sociological bridge, arising from observable experience.

Suffering: Deserved and Undeserved

And it's not just, is it? Almost it looks, doesn't it, like a kind of vicarious suffering. I have to pay for what my grandfather did. Isn't that vicarious? Moreover, the particular parents might have done right, they might have been exceptionally good and still their off-spring, being of a certain social layer or class, are caught with the rest of their generation and have to pay, not so much for what the parents or grandparents did, but for what everybody did in that social layer. It is a kind of common indebtedness, a common guilt, and they all have to pay.

And in another example, we see a city is destroyed in the war or by an earthquake. Maybe half of the people of the city have deserved it, the other half no, and some

might be very good and still be destroyed with the rest of them. Where is justice? You see, if we only think in terms of cause and effect, in terms of guilt, failure, deviation and punishment, we never can find our way through. We might get bitter and critical and negative and finally turn away from the whole thing and say, "Well, it doesn't make sense." "This is not the divine attitude. This cannot be the doing of the Lord."

Suffering: Means and Ends

That would be wrong if we were to turn away because of our inability to understand. That would be our human deficiency, once more. And fortunately, we are able to say at least something in favor of divine justice. We don't know the last word — we never will, of course! But at least one new vista has opened up with modern psychology. Thinking, not in terms of cause and effect any longer, but thinking in terms of means and ends, and knowing about the process of human development, of the evolution of the human brain, and of spiritual evolution, we might understand that suffering is not only the effect of forms of deviation. Suffering is often the means for evolution.

Our ancestors have been aware of the thing, but they were not able, or they were not daring enough, to express it, as I did now, in terms of means and ends. They called it tests. God is testing out his children. Him whom He loves most, He punishes most. This is not very clear, is it? Why should he punish those whom he loves most, more than the others? But I think that was an attempt to describe the simple truth that the spirit of humanity does not grow, does not develop, unless it is pried loose from its moorings in the past. And that is pain. There is no evolution without pain.

Suffering and Growth

There is no progress without regret, regarding the past. We want to grow up. We have to put parts of ourselves aside; the toys of childhood may lose their value and we might regret leaving them behind. If we ever want to be more spiritual than we are, it would be advisable to die, wouldn't it? Let's leave behind this old tent here. Let's get out of the body. But that would be painful, wouldn't it? Most of us prefer to stay in this old body, though it is rather worn out,

because we are afraid of the new. Yet there is no progress without pain. We must pay the price, cutting ourselves loose from the past.

Maybe a battleship is a good comparison. It is tied to its moorings and has to be loosened in order to begin the voyage. And there is the pain of departure. There is the homesickness of those who are on the ship. That seems to be an inherent law of human nature. We regret to give up something and therefore we have to suffer. And this process of being cut loose from the things we love, and even from the people we love, is part of what we call the cross.

Even Jesus, before he died, had to pay this kind of human price. Looking at his disciples, he wept, knowing that he had to leave them behind in a terrible predicament, foreseeing how they would suffer, how they would groan, how they would grope through the dark without a shepherd—sheep without a shepherd. But he also knew that it had to be done. And on the part of the disciples, they had to give up their master. They had to renounce their childlike discipleship in order to grow up, in order to become independent, mature men, the future leaders of the future church.

So there is no real growth without suffering. And this suffering, as I said earlier, is partly caused by our own wrong-doing, by our own failure — sin. And partly it is brought upon us by the deviation of someone else. As far as our growth is concerned, it does not matter whether we suffer for our own deeds or for what our parents or grandparents did, or for what Adolf Hitler did; as far as our own growth is concerned, it does not matter.

The Cross Points to the Future

Now suppose suffering is upon us. Our attitude toward the cross would be different, you see, if we should turn toward the future, instead of looking at our suffering, trying to figure out "Is it just or unjust?" or saying "I didn't deserve it, someone else deserved it," feeling that it came to the wrong address, like a letter going astray. And here is, I think, one of the main lessons we should learn about the Cross of Golgotha. It is there on behalf of the future, on behalf of the kingdom of Heaven. This undoing of the past, the doing away with the sins of the

past, relinquishing our desire for the past—that's part of it. It's the beginning of the new, the opening up of the new life. And how can this be? How can we recognize this on the plane of our present life?

When Faith Is Lacking

The experience of Jesus himself is evidently so high that we cannot even try to understand it. It's no use. But we can try to understand what happened to his disciples when they watched him, when they went through their own dark night of the soul. During those three days between his crucifixion and his appearance, there they were in their own night, bearing their own cross, just as they had to carry it years later when they themselves were crucified in a literal sense of the word. We can try to compare ourselves with them. There, the darkness, the absence of their Master, the lack of belief, lack of faith, is the outstanding feature. If you can imagine one of the disciples keeping his faith, remembering definitely and knowing the truth about what Jesus said about his resurrection, he still would suffer, but much less than the others.

But they all doubted, they did not understand. They were bewildered and dumb, numbed by what had happened. And that was their cross. And in a certain way you might say they deserved it. Why didn't they have more faith? They just didn't have it. They participated in our general human weakness—that we lose faith when things are going wrong, too wrong. We can stand a certain amount of failure, of disappointment, but when things close in too much, if darkness draws too close, we give up hope, we are crushed, and the "dark night of the soul" is upon us. That is what I would call our human cross in contradistinction to the Cross of Jesus, himself.

From the Physical to the Spiritual Plane

And still, in the last analysis it's the same, it's the human cross. The change of the human being from the past to the future, from the plane of human good, of material good, of material physical life, to the plane of spiritual life, of new values that we do not yet recognize, at least not fully enough, which must be accomplished. And the human being, we—as we are—like the disciples, cannot do it. None of us could find the

way. Nobody ever could, before or since, had it not been for Jesus himself, who went all the way and appeared to them, saying, as it were, "Here I am. See how it worked. Give away your life on the physical plane and you will gain your life on the spiritual plane. Here is the proof, Golgotha."

They saw him. That was the evidence. And from then on, we should think it must have been simpler. It must have been easier to keep faith in utmost darkness. From then on, time and again, we find individuals or even groups of people who were able to keep faith, to keep their allegiance to Christ, their loyalty—and that means keeping their faith, knowing that physical death is not the end, it's just the beginning. It's just relinquishing the past, opening the door into the future.

Our Fear of Tests

Since then, it is possible. But though it is possible and though, time and time again, people have proved that it is possible, that it does work, it still seems to be so difficult that we must believe it. Yet, though we are told it, we are afraid of the tests. I think we all are. If we were put to a test tonight, it would be very bad, wouldn't it? We are afraid, and rightly so. So we should have more classes in the grade school of the spirit. And I hope that psychology, as psychology is developing now, the newer development, can help a little to provide a few psychological steps in the nursery of the spirit.

Here is one step. If the negative value, the suffering, the cross, the giving up of the past and the relinquishing of all the highly desired values of physical life—if this turns out to be gain, then loss is gain. And this equation must hold good not only in the moment of real crucifixion, in the business of being shot, or being executed by some tyrant, but must also hold good in minor sufferings of everyday life.

Suppose we have a pet dog, and he dies. Or we have a house which we love very much, a house we inherited from our parents, and it burns down. You have a country that you love, and you have to give it up. You have a child, highly loved, and he dies, or worse, he is taken prisoner overseas and you don't even know whether he is dead or alive. Or you have many friends, many relatives, who are starving to death. Lots of suf-

fering is going on around us, from the smallest to the largest degree . . . from the pet dog, run over by a car, to the most serious suffering that hits millions of people simultaneously. Well, the equation of the Cross, that loss is gain, must hold good in all these cases, or the whole good news of the gospel is not good at all.

Our Fear of Change

What can psychology say? Fortunately we can say a little. We can help a few people to come to terms with their own cross, their own suffering. Where we love something, someone, the thing represents a value. As it is now, it's a static thing, something stable, or something we wish were stable. The house should remain as it is forever, the child — oh well, the child might grow up. Yes, we say, that's too bad, he should remain my child forever. You often see a mother who says of her child at the age of two, "I wish he would never grow older." There it begins already . . . this human weakness. We want something stable, static, unchanging, that will last forever. Of course, theoretically we know that if it should last forever it would become boring, it would become intolerable, but we cannot face change. We are afraid of change because change always seems to imply insecurity. The result might be against our wills, against what we desire, so we are afraid of the future because we are afraid of the change.

I know many people who are afraid of their own death, not because they are afraid of being dead. They might like to be dead. They even try to kill themselves, so much would they like to be dead. But they are afraid of dying, the process, the step from life to death. This is what they are afraid of. And, in the same way, many of us are afraid of growing older. Can you imagine what you will be like ten years from now? How many teeth lost, how many hairs turned grey or falling out? All the miseries and diseases that will come with old age! If not ten years from now, then certainly twenty years from now, you won't look nice then, any longer. So we are afraid of all that, aren't we?

Past and Future Values

We must try to face it, relinquishing a certain set of values, forgetting it, leaving it

behind, in order to gain another set of values on a higher plane. If we could find this new set of values . . . if we should reach the higher plane, I am sure we would all gladly give up all these questionable, always changeable, values of the past. Exchanging the past for the much more certain, much more creative values of the future, of the spiritual plane . . . if only we were sure that we could do it!

Now here's another implication of the very idea of the Cross. There were three men crucified, and one of them died, as far as we can see, in misery. He died going down stairs, going down to perdition, while the two others, Jesus and his new friend, died going up to the higher plane. So the cross implies a decision. Now, what kind of decision? Do we decide which way we go? Or is it decided about us by someone else? Or are the two decisions identical?

The Need for Decision

As far as the story of the two thieves is concerned, it looks as though we decided. The one decided to repent and he turned to Jesus, asking for his mercy. He was accepted and as far as his acceptance was concerned, it was decided from outside, but only after he had decided himself. So the mystery of decision is involved. Well, if that is so, then we know a little more.

It is difficult to give up what we are sure of, or hope, or think we are sure of, giving up the values of the past when we are not so sure of the values of the future, when it is not yet certain whether we will reach the spiritual plane. But the decision has to be made . . . what the theologians call the "judgment." And the decision is partly ours but evidently not quite all ours. And so insecure are we about ourselves that we don't even know whether, in the moment of trial, in utmost darkness, we would be able or willing to choose the light.

What kind of creatures are we! It's amazing, isn't it? And again, we have to say, without Jesus who has gone the way, who has opened up the way, we wouldn't know anything about it. We certainly would not be able to decide on our own account. But now the way is open. And now it should be possible. It should be easy to choose the light. Here we are, we could give up the past, all the values that we cherish so much,

if we were sure that we could reach the values of the future, the spiritual plane. But whether we can reach this or not depends largely, if not altogether, upon our own decision. If I were able and willing to decide in favor of the light, then the sooner, the better. I could be sure that the mercies of the divine powers would come to meet me from the other side. In the midst of darkness, light would shine. I can be sure of this now. But I cannot be sure of my own decision eventually.

Faith for the Future

Why not? It looks like a mystery, doesn't it? But it's very human, very simple, very close to our human nature. Suppose you are walking up a trail in the mountains. And there's a small path. The trail gets smaller and narrower. It still is, say, two or three feet wide. That's enough to walk on. It's enough to dance on. It's as large as a sidewalk in a city. Anyone can walk on a space two or three feet wide. But if it's in the mountains, between a precipice and a wall, then it's more difficult. Why? Because we do not trust our human nature. One wrong step means certain death, falling down over the precipice, breaking one's neck. If we had faith as much as half a mustard seed, we could go on the path. It wouldn't be difficult, would it? But we don't have faith, and we are haunted by the idea of falling down. If your imagination is vivid enough, try to imagine a situation just now, right here. You are on this mountain trail and here is the precipice. You feel your heart beat and your knees shaking, and you will be haunted by the picture of yourself falling down. Very nice picture!

The more we are haunted by such a picture—we call it an image, a negative image, in psychology—the less it is possible to walk on that trail. If we were filled with the image of security, of our human nature which is good enough to walk alone in the street, then we could walk in the mountain as we do on the sidewalk of our home town. Why not? It depends on what arms us, what fills our imagination.

Now we see what faith is. When we have faith, then we are sure of the future as well as of the present and even of the past, in spite of all our short-comings. And then to walk there on this mountain trail will be very easy. And it might be right, quite correct to say that it is as if someone holds your hand, leading you along that dangerous path. While in the other case, not believing in any guiding angel who would help us, we would be harmed by the picture of falling down and we would fall down. And we would think, while falling, "Wasn't I right?" Sure! That's what pessimism does.

On the other hand, that's what faith does. And here you see what the Cross of Golgotha, now I mean the Cross of Jesus, does or can do to every mortal one of us. If we were familiar with it, if we could meditate on it as some mystics do, as maybe some of us do, then the whole process of dying here and waking up on the other side would be familiar to us. And the appearance of the messengers from the other side would be something quite usual, nothing particularly exciting or remarkable. We would feel the presence of the other side and the messengers of the other side all day long. Then, in the predicament of this mountain-top trail we would be safe. We wouldn't even notice the degree of danger, the degree of danger that we and our fellow men go through.

We Must Let Go

This is how the cross—I mean now the Cross of Jesus, the experience of Jesus, can help us today. For whatever reason we are crucified, nailed to our own cross, because of our own sins, our own faults, or because of our parents' sins, or the sins of our particular social group—all this does not matter. The deepest reason for our suffering is that we have to let go. We have to cut loose from the moorings of the past in order to launch, like a ship is launched, on the ocean of the future. And that can be done only if the real experience of the Cross, the glorious light-experience of the Cross, is there, alive in us. It shines in the darkness until suddenly the darkness is gone. Only the light is left.