

## **‘Story of Easter continuing in us’**

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

I have gradually learnt to read the Bible so, that I seek **questions** in it, rather than answers. There are some questions which are so good, that it’s a pity to destroy them by answers. I have come to the conviction that God does not approach us as an answer, but rather as a question.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* According to Mark’s Gospel Jesus left this world with this question on his lips. After much searching this harrowing sentence has become more and more the cornerstone of my faith and starting point for my reflections on faith, of my theology. This strange testament of Jesus can of course be understood as a hopeless cry of despair. Does there remain any space at all for some kind of Christianity beyond the dark abyss of that cry?

But we can phrase the question differently: Isn’t the Christianity that crossed the abyss too easily and found a pat explanation for those words and displaced them from its memory – or even preferred to mishear them – too shallow? As we read in numerous reassuring commentaries, at that point Jesus was simply quoting Psalm 22, which starts with these harrowing words but ends with the calm consolation of faith. But even if that were so, does it attenuate in any way the urgency of the particular line that Jesus spoke? Chesterton made his oft-cited comment on those words to the effect that if atheists were to choose a religion they should choose Christianity, *because it is the only one in which God seemed himself for an instant to be an atheist*<sup>1</sup> Theologians defending the thesis that *God died in Christ*<sup>2</sup> are implicitly saying that only the All-knowing – unlike we mortals or the “Immortals” (pagan gods) – *knows* what death is.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Chesterton G. K.: *Orthodoxy*, London 1908

<sup>2</sup> The orthodoxy of this paradoxical sentence – in seeming contradiction to the article of the faith that Jesus died on the cross in his human not his divine nature – is guaranteed by an important methodological principle of Christian theology: “communicatio idiomatum”. On the basis of the hypostatic union of the human and divine nature in the person of Jesus Christ, characteristics of God’s World (Logos) can be applied to the man Jesus and human characteristics to the Logos.

By citing Jesus' cry on the cross the gospel would seem to be describing what the Apostle's Creed expresses in the words "he descended into Hell". Jesus' cry and the phrase "descended into Hell" are two different ways of expressing the fact that Jesus's solidarity with sinners was so great that he took upon himself the "wages of sin" – the boundless void of desolation, of total alienation from God. After all, what else does the word "hell" mean?<sup>3</sup> When human imagination peopled hell with demons and torture chambers, perhaps it was trying to conceal the even greater horror aroused by the inconceivable void of eternal Nothingness.

A somewhat different line of reflection was suggested to me by the opinion that a more faithful rendering of Jesus's words would be "My God, **for what purpose** have you abandoned me?"<sup>4</sup> It then becomes evident that "Jesus's testament" is not the cry of resignation of someone in despair, looking back on his past and renouncing his faith and hope, but a question uttered in an urgent prayer to God, aimed at the future and the meaning that will only now emerge.

What is the purpose of it all, God? That question is not asked of us and we are not competent to think up an answer in the form of speculative theories about the meaning of the cross. That question can be asked only at the moment of death or departure from this world, because the world itself has no answer to it. The question is directed beyond the horizon of the world as we know it and can know it, beyond our collective experience and the subject of our knowledge. It is a question that bursts through the world and life in the world towards a radical mystery, the Unknown that we call God. But in Jesus that Unknown descended

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Ratzinger in his book on eschatology (Ratzinger, J.: *Eschatologie. Tod und ewiges Leben*, Regensburg 2007, English translation: *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, CUA Press, 1988) goes even further in his commentary on the phrase "descended into Hell": "With Jesus's descent, God Himself descended into Sheol: as a consequence death ceases to be a forgotten land of darkness and a place of the merciless alienation from God. In Christ God Himself descended into the land of death and turned it from a place without communication into a space of His presence."

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Frankl V., Lapide P.: *Gottsuche und Sinnfrage*, Gütersloh 2005

among us, into history, into the world – yes, and into our pain, our dark moments, our death and our hells.

Jesus's question on the cross can only be directed at God – and not we, but God Himself can answer it. But what we can ask is how God answered the Son's question. The gospel's answer is a cipher, a word denoting something that the apostles didn't understand when Jesus spoke to them about it<sup>5</sup>, and which – let's admit it – we don't really understand today, namely the word “**resurrection**”. This central concept of the Christian confession is too important for us to shy away from it into naïve notions of the mere revival of a corpse (resurrection is *not* resuscitation and return to terrestrial life) or facile symbolisation (resurrection is *not* simply a mythological expression of the belief that “Jesus's ideas are eternally alive”).

Perhaps we could try expressing God's answer to the cross differently: After people had eliminated Jesus from the Earth, God “put Him back in the game”. But the Jesus who was put back was changed. “The world did not know him” – and those who knew Him intimately, scarcely recognised him. The disciples on the road to Emmaus thought he was a stranger from foreign parts, Mary Magdalene took Him to be the gardener and Thomas asks for “physical proof”. His disciples recognised him in the gesture of breaking bread, Mary through his voice and Thomas through his wounds.<sup>6</sup>

In the breaking of bread, his voice and his wounds *they encounter His love*– that is His “proof of identity”. That alone showed itself to be a power stronger than death.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mark 9.32

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Luke 24.15; John 20.15-16; John 20.25

Those, of whom he spoke in his description of the Last Judgment, met him (although they didn't recognise him) when they showed love for Him in "the least" and "the needy".<sup>7</sup> And when the resurrected Jesus meets Peter he asks him about love: Do you love me more than these?<sup>8</sup>

If the cross, whose deepest pain is expressed by Jesus' question, remained without any answer from God, it would be absurd. If there were no other answer to the pains of the world, to death, to desperate questions and an unquenchable thirst for life there was not other answer than those provided by "this world", then neither this world nor life in it would have any meaning, because no satisfactory answer can be found within its bounds. But God's answer is not some "other world" but once more Jesus. Even in His dying and death He does not cease to be God's Word to us.

At the moment of His death, Jesus himself *becomes a question*. And God's answer is once more Jesus, but a hidden, *unfamiliar Jesus* – the "stranger on the road". He comes as a stranger and a traveller, who must not be held onto on his journey to the Father. "Do not hold onto me," he tells Mary Magdalene. And at Emmaus, as soon as he lets himself be recognised he disappears from the disciples' gaze.<sup>9</sup> The familiar Jesus, "Jesus from the human viewpoint"<sup>10</sup>, is no longer here.

*Si comprehendis, non est Deus* – if you think you know something, then you can be sure it is not God, wrote St Augustine. It equally applies to the Risen Christ, who loved surprises; if you think you don't need to look for Him any more, then you won't meet Him. It was no accident that at the Areopagus in Athens the

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7 Cf. Matt. 25.40

8 Cf. John 21.15-18

9 Cf. John 20.17 and Luke 24.31

10 Cf. 2 Cor 5.16

Apostle Paul chose **the altar to the Unknown God** as an appropriate place to preach about the resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

Paul proceeds to interpret this “Unknown God”: “What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.” Paul says: “He is not far from any of us. For in him we live and move and have our being...”

There is something we should note: an “Unknown God” is not a distant God. On the contrary he is incredibly close to us: “in him we live, and move.” He is unknown not because he is too far away but because he is too close. After all, we know least of all about what is closest to us, what is most proper to us, what we take for granted. None of us has seen our own face – we only see its image in a mirror. And we can only see God in a mirror; elsewhere Paul states in so many words that during our lives we see God only partly: “indistinctly, as in a mirror”, but after death we will see him “face to face”.

Paul wants to show the Athenians the “face” of the unknown God, who is too close, as mirrored in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, above all his paradoxical climax: the cross and resurrection. But he does not get that far. When Paul says the words “resurrection from the dead” some of the Athenians start to sneer, while others walk off, having lost interest: they have understood the resurrection as something they were naturally familiar with, whether as an absurd fable, or as a frequent image in the mythology of the surrounding nations, where gods frequently died and rose from the dead.

How might Paul’s sermon about the face of God in the mirror of the Easter story have continued? I am sure that what happened on the Areopagus is paradigmatic in its way. “The Altar to an Unknown God” is precisely the most appropriate “topos” for proclaiming the Christian message. For Paul, as a Jew and a Christian, the only true God is the God that can’t be portrayed, one hidden in mystery. **A known god is no god at all.** It is not surprising that the ancient

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Acts 17.23

world – a “world full of gods” – for centuries regarded the Jews and Christians as atheists.

I am convinced that if anyone wants to preach the Good News of the paradoxical God of the Bible, he has to find the “altar to an Unknown God”. To speak about Christ at the altar to familiar gods would be blasphemy or risk even greater misunderstanding than on that occasion at the Athenian Areopagus.

J. B. Metz wrote: if the cry of the Crucified One is not heard in our preaching about the resurrection, then our message is the mythology of victory, not the core of Christian theology.

If, according to Paul, our belief in Jesus’s resurrection is the condition of our salvation, then that belief must clearly be something much more than our conviction that it once happened; after all, our opinions and suppositions, the theories we agree with, and the knowledge we carry in our heads, are not what is going to save us. The cause of our redemption was Christ’s sacrifice on the cross – and we accept (embrace) that unmerited gift of grace through faith. That faith, however, means allowing that event to enter our lives as a whole as a transforming power, it is not enough to simply to include it among our knowledge about famous events of the distant past.

Resurrection – from God’s viewpoint – is a perfect and completed action, whereby the Father freed the Son from the snares of death. Seen (imperfectly, how else?) from the viewpoint of the history of the church and world, however, that event is still an “unfinished revolution” – *it is like a subterranean river*, boring its way through the hard soil of our lack of faith, sinfulness and closed-mindedness, and only here and there visibly gushing out amidst the incidents of our lives. When Mary Magdalene heard her name from the lips of the one she took to be the gardener, when Paul on the road to Damascus heard the question “Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?”, and when St Augustine in the garden heard the song “Tole, lege!”, these were *not simply post-Resurrection events, the*

*power and the reality of the Resurrection was within those events.* The Resurrection happened there too, so that those people were able to experience it as an unfinished, living event.

Many distinguished theologians support the theory of “*creatio continua*” – continuing creation; could we not similarly speak of a “*ressurrectio continua*”, a continuing Resurrection?

Augustine wrote somewhere that praying means to close one’s eyes and realize that God is creating the world now. I would add: to believe means to open one’s heart and realize that now, at this very moment the sealed stone has been rolled aside and the rays of the Easter morning have triumphed over the cold, dark tomb.