

The Triumph of God

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Jesus Christ our Lord . . . was . . . declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead."—Romans 1:3-4.

What is the nature of this triumph of God that we witness in the resurrection of our Lord? Let us see if we can be specific about it as we analyze it.

I.

Consider, to begin with, that it is the triumph of truth over error. By it, says our text, Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God with power." Easter then is God's voice; it is God at the microphone, making a declaration to men. Mark what is declared: "Jesus Christ" is "the Son of God." But that is the very thing that was denied by those who put Him to death. When on one occasion, they were on the point of stoning Him, he asked them, "Many good works have I shown you from my Father; for which of these works do ye stone me?" They answered, "For a good work we stone thee not, but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God." (John 10:32-33).

Here then was an intolerable contradiction: Jesus insisted that He was the Son of God; they denied it. Who was right? Where did the truth lie—with them or with Him? If He was not the Son of God, they were right both in the denial of His claim and in the charge of blasphemy. Let us not blur the issue: Jesus of Nazareth was either the blessed Son of God or He was the blaspheming son of Joseph. Which was He?

If you want the answer, cries Paul, look at the resurrection. Gaze into the empty tomb. Study that band of disciples, themselves completely changed from doubt to assurance, going forth in His name to see the lives of men everywhere transformed by His power. What does it mean, if it does not signify that truth is vindicated over falsehood?

Yes, Easter proclaims the victory of truth over error. The lie that Jesus was a pretender and a blasphemer is hurled back, while the validity of His claims and the reality of His deity are flung out like some color-fast banner for all the world to behold and to confess.

II

Let us remember, furthermore, that the triumph of God in the resurrection of His Son is the triumph of love over hate.

Imagine yourself listening one day to Jesus as, near the beginning of His ministry, he pronounced the Beatitudes. That eightfold blessedness of the godly life, that "Heavenly Octave," as someone has called them—how lovely it all sounds! Then imagine that you saw no more of Jesus until, some three years later, you came suddenly within sight of Mount Calvary, where He was being crucified. Suppose you had tried to reconcile the sweet and charming things you had heard Him say in the Beatitudes with these grim happenings going on before your eyes. It can't be, you would have said to yourself. These things are in hopeless clash: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" . . . "Jesus bearing His cross went forth;" "Blessed are the merciful" . . . "They came to a place called Golgotha;" "Blessed are the peace makers" . . . "There they crucified him."

Let's frankly admit that on the hard surface

of things it would have appeared to you that all these beautiful sayings of Jesus were just so much talking in a vacuum. Love, justice and mercy? They never get you anywhere in this jingle of a world—except to a Cross. So it seemed then, and so it seems now—unless you are keen enough to look beneath the surface of things.

To be sure, the man who sits in the seat of the scornful can see much that adds fuel to the fire of his scorn. Here is a clipping from a newspaper: "A Good Samaritan motorist took pity Wednesday afternoon on a hitchhiker with a sore foot; and as a result the Good Samaritan lost his car, \$120.00 in cash, and his faith in thumb-wagging travelers!" The language is saved from bitterness by its touch of humour, but the cynicism, however gentle, is there: it doesn't pay to be kind!

Admittedly, we live in a world where often, without any relief of humour, love goes unrequited, kindness goes unrewarded, bravery goes unnoticed, decency goes undefended. Looking at it from one angle, one might say that the perfect illustration of this reversal of values was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Jesus leaned against the vicious and destructive forces, but He was not enough for them. They hurled Him back, beaten and broken. They left Him on a Cross, white and silent in death.

Is that all? No, thank God it is not. They left Him in death, but God did not. God raised Him up, as Peter puts it in one place. They raised Him on a Cross in hate; God raised Him from a tomb in love. Look at what has been happening ever since. Their hate brought their ruin; His love has brought Him to even higher eminence in the affection and worship of the discerning.

You see, the resurrection is God's warning to all of us that we should not be too quick to decide when the real victories of life are being won. Bitterness and pride and sheer force may win a battle, but they always, always, lose the war. Hatred throws its weight around and looks momentarily like a winner. In the end, however, love will be found singing its deathless music when hatred and greed are flat upon the floor.

Here is a navy chaplain telling his story about the late war in the South Pacific, in the "Solomons." He has been to a village where he had a thrilling meeting with a native Christian minister, a big black fellow whose jet skin gets lost in his stiff, bushy hair, and whose shoulder and arm muscles make you think of a piece of ebony with magic ripples in it. Alpheus—for that is his name—is every inch a gentleman, speaks in almost cultured English and treats his white brother in Christ with every courtesy.

He points to an old man a few paces away, lying on a grass mat. "That is our chief," he explains. "He is about 100 years old. He was a head-hunter." The chaplain said he felt like shuddering as he looked at the tattoos and other disfigurements on the old warrior's body. Today, old and stricken, he is the head of a Christian tribe. How did it happen?

Well, of course, it did not just happen. Things like that never do. Fifty years ago a white missionary landed on the island. The difficulties he faced and the threats upon his

life were almost unbelievable. He took it all courageously and, what was even more impressive, graciously. For every rebuff he returned a kindness. For every threat he gave back a promise. For every display of hostility and hatred he gave back a manifestation of good will. Finally his devotion to them and to Christ captured their hearts. And now the missionary has been gone for more than ten years. When he left, the life of the village was entirely transformed and a native church was firmly established under the leadership of this fine pastor who told the story to the chaplain.

What is the triumph of God? you ask. What is the victory of Easter? There you have it, enacted once more, as it has been a thousand times since Calvary. It is the victory of love over hate!

III.

Again, the triumph of God, as seen at Easter, is the triumph of grace over sin.

As Paul puts it, Christ "died for our sins and rose again for our justification." Here in fact is more than forgiveness; here is a new life. Here is something greater than a new start; here is a new man. Only Jesus Christ Who is "declared to be the Son of God with power" can produce that.

And for this new man the great word is "holiness." Paul assures us that it was by "the Spirit of Holiness" that Christ was raised from the dead and declared to be the Son of God. What Jesus did on earth He did through the power of the Holy Spirit. When we, as Christians, are fully given over and given up to Christ, we too may live and witness and serve and suffer and triumph in the power of the Holy Ghost. This is what we may call the risen life with Christ here on earth. It is the way of renunciation, dedication and faith.

What a triumph—the victory of grace over sin.

IV

The triumph of God in the Christ of Easter is the triumph of life over death. It was by the "resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead," says our text, that our Lord was declared to be the Son of God with power. "Death," says George Buttrick in his just-published book, "death is the final and deepest sign" of man's ignorance, finiteness and sin. Even so, Jesus chose to pitch the final battle right there. He pitched it—and He won! Because He won we have a Christianity with an Easter in it.

Recently there passed into the life celestial a minister who, during my boyhood days in Pasadena, California, was the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Hear now his triumphant confession of faith, written by his own hand some time before death called him:

"When men go down to the sea in ships,
'Tis not to the sea they go;
Some isle or pole the mariner's goal,
And thither they sail through calm and gale,
When down to the sea they go.

When souls go down to the sea by ship,
And the dark ship's name is Death,
Why mourn and wail at the vanishing sail?
Though outward bound, God's world is round,
And only a ship is Death.

When I go down to the sea by ship,
And Death unfurls her sail,
Weep not for me, for there will be
A living Host on another coast
To beckon and cry, "All hail!"

He who can lift that witness fronting death has tasted at once the power and the peace of "The Triumph of God."—Heart and Life.