

“All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side”

—PILGRIM’S PROGRESS

The Pilgrim

O. P. Kretzmann

Weep Not for Me

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Year after year, we have come to terms with the fact and the meaning of Good Friday and all that led up to it. Given what we are, it should not be surprising that our natural inclination is to turn the Passion and death of our Lord to our own purposes, to distort it from what God was doing in and through it all to something which we do. The extreme form of this distortion is that of certain flagellant groups which beat themselves, apparently on the theory that an angry God needs still more blood to satisfy his justice and appease his wrath. But in less extreme forms much of our observance of Lent tends to become a form of self-flagellation. We seemingly can not be content to adore the love that loved us to the uttermost. We insist on adding our little something to that which needs nothing added to it — the reconciliation which God accomplished, fully and on His own — in the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ.

At the root of this insistence is a misreading of the Gospel which is so serious as to distort the Good News into a new Law. Reduced to its essentials, the Gospel says that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself.” We distort it, indeed contradict it, when we say, whether in so many words or merely by implication, that “God was in Christ, reconciling himself to the world.” If we start from the assumption of a God who hated men and had to be appeased before he could love them, there must forever remain a residue of doubt about the finality of his act in Christ.

But if we start, as the apostles and evangelists did start, from a view of a God who loved us even while we were in our sins, and who gave his Son as conclusive proof of that love, we can abandon once for all the wearying, worrisome attempt to make ourselves acceptable to Him, for we can know that we don’t have to win his acceptance. It is already there — as it was even before the events of Holy Week and Good Friday.

Once we begin to understand this, Lent ceases to be an occasion for orgies of weeping and self condemnation and becomes once more what

THE CRESSET

it was originally intended to be, a time of preparation to receive the risen Christ. It becomes, in other words, a penitential season.

And here we have to rescue another great and holy word from the decay into which it has fallen as a consequence of our stubborn insistence upon reconciling God to ourselves. To be penitent does, indeed, imply sorrow over the sin which alienates us from our Father and the sins which result from that alienation. But this sorrow is a godly sorrow only if it purges itself of every element of that work-righteousness which tempts us to suppose that God takes pity on us because we are sorrowful. God pities us “like as a father pitieth his children”; that is, because He loves us and only because He loves us. Our sorrow does not change His hatred into love. It is itself his gift, the opening up of our hearts so that his love — healing and comforting — can come flooding in.

Neither must penitence be understood as a kind of exercise of the will, a determination to clean up our disordered lives so that God can find us lovable. The will is indeed involved in penitence — but, again, on the receiving end. For it is God who works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure. Any attempt on our part to win his favor by making great resolutions (which we can not keep) can only drive us to that very despair from which we were redeemed by the sufferings and death of the Savior.

Real penitence is the abandonment of all efforts to make ourselves acceptable to God and, as Tillich has put it, the acceptance of the fact that we are accepted. It is, in other words, to let God be God, and to let his grace be grace. This seems so simple, and yet it is the hardest thing in the world. For it requires us not only to walk by faith rather than by sight; it requires us to deny the ultimate reality of much of what we think we see — the apparently inexorable law of retribution which seems to run through the whole creation, the universality of the principle of tit for tat, even (in some sense) the Scriptural warning that what a man sows he shall also reap.

To be truly penitent is to abandon one’s self to the love and pity of God, to throw one’s self on the mercy of the court in the full confidence that the Judge is our loving father. In the highest and holiest sense, to be penitent is to relax, to quit trying to prove anything either to ourselves or to God, and to let him take over the direction of our lives. It is to rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him, confident that his thoughts towards us are thoughts of peace.

THE CRESSET

This is the Christian Gospel, signed when our Redeemer died and sealed when he was glorified on Easter morning. May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, fill our hearts with all joy and peace in believing. And may he make us ministers and channels of that reconciliation which, though already operative through his own act in Christ, remains unknown to millions of our fellow-men who still live out their lives of desperation in fear of the idols that oppress them.

