

# BLACKFRIARS

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VOL. XXI

DECEMBER 1940

No. 249

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## THE EXAMPLE OF CHRIST<sup>1</sup>

THE knowledge that Christ was both God and man must be the central fact in the life of every Christian. Because He was a man, He has given an example for us to follow; because He was God, He has given us the strength to follow His example, and for every Christian the central lesson to be learnt from Christ is to love, to give and to endure.

Looking back over two thousand years, the details of Christ's life on earth can seem very far away. The setting can seem so very different from anything that we have known; the barren, stony hillsides of Judea, the crowded market places, the small white flat-roofed houses, the groups of orientals moving slowly along the dusty roads. Yet so many of the details are commonplace enough. The birth in poverty, the childhood in a poor household, the years as a workman, and then apparent success, apparent failure, death. All that could have happened, all that has happened, in any country, and in any time. The setting alters, but the rhythm of human life and the problems of human choice remain the same. Everything that is fundamental, the capacity of loving, the power of giving, the will to be alive, joy and agony and death, remain unaltered since Christ lived at Nazareth. Yet if only we could see it, they are no longer the same as they were before the Word took flesh and dwelt amongst us. The life that we know, and the death that we know, confronted Christ. He was man as well as God. He lived and died.

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<sup>1</sup> The substance of a broadcast address delivered, B.B.C. Home Service, October 4th, 1940.

But because He was God as well as man, both life and death have been transfigured for us. Nothing that ever happened to Him can ever be merely commonplace any more. For it has become linked to the divine. No problem of choice can seem insoluble. For Christ has shown us how God would solve it. He has taught us how to give. An utter generosity is the mark of the Spirit of Christ. He came on earth not for what He could get, but for what He could give. He gave freely and spontaneously, He gave Himself. That is the only path that can lead us through the maze of personal relationships that form our lives. To spend ourselves for others as Christ spent Himself upon the Cross—that is the way to God, for it is God's way to us. That is enough to transform our lives, for we shall be living them as Christ lived His. And yet, it is so easy for us to lose that path. We have lost it when we are selfish, when we are self-centred, when we are self-pitying. For then we have ceased to follow Christ.

But there is only one way by which we can learn to give to others as Christ gave, and that is by trying to love others as Christ loved them. For the love that we can learn from Christ is not something weak and vague and impersonal. His love for each one of us is personal love. His love for the woman taken in adultery, for St. John, or for the thief upon the Cross, was a personal love. It is only by loving others personally that we come to know them personally. It is only by loving others personally that we can cease to be self-centred, that we can come to see things as they see them, to feel things as they feel them, and to have a glimmer of that infinite compassion which was part of the generosity of Christ. 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.'

It is by learning to love others for their own sakes, not for ours, that we learn to give without thinking of the consequences for ourselves. And if once we could learn that, we could be free. We would no longer be self-centred, we would no longer always be thinking what

might happen to us. Being free and being generous, we have the strength to endure. We could face life and death as Christ faced them, and conquer both as Christ conquered them. 'Have confidence, for I have overcome the world.'

It is so hard for us to follow Christ's example. There is so much that can sweep us away from it; our weakness, our ingrained habits of selfishness, the very circumstances of our lives. He was God as well as Man. We are men only, selfish, and limited, and inadequate. Yet because Christ became our brother, we have become something more than ourselves. He has made it possible for us to follow His example, and to choose as He would have chosen, for He has given us a new life, a life with Him, a life in Him. We have the strength of His presence and of His companionship, if we could only see it, we are as close to Him as was Peter, or as Iscariot. The words that He spoke at the Last Supper were spoken to all who would try to follow Him. 'I am the true Vine. Abide in Me and I in you. I am the vine, you are the branches. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abide in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you the branches. He that abideth in me and I in Him, the same beareth much fruit. As the Father hath loved me, I also have loved you. Abide in my love.' We can never fully understand the mystery of the new life that Christ has brought us. Yet we can see that because Christ has become our brother, we have become God's sons and, if sons, heirs also. Linked to Christ, we share in something that is more than human, we have the capacity for heroism. Perhaps we will not use that capacity. There is so much that can pull us downwards, but even if we become prodigals, we will still be prodigal sons, still have the memory of a Father's house to distract us from the feeding of the swine. Even when we fall, Christ is with us. We may fail, but we can gain from Him the light to know when we are failing, and the strength to

keep on fighting till we die. We will suffer, but we know who suffered with us. Death and agony are commonplace enough. Sooner or later, all of us, whether Christian or non-Christian, will take the road to Calvary. But the others are like Simon of Cyrene, they carry Christ's cross without knowing whose cross it is they carry. But we, we are like Simon Peter, and if we fail Him, fail Him knowingly, and if we die with Him, knowing with whom we die.

It was getting dark on Calvary when the soldiers came to the bodies. One was dead already, but on either side the two thieves were still living. One of the thieves was dying as he had lived, alone in a public solitude, intent on his own agony, self-centred, self-enclosed. But the other would never again be alone, for he knew who it was that hung beside him, and he knew that before the night he would be with Him in Paradise.

The setting alters. Does the setting matter? We, too, all of us, have been thieves, filching from others that which was their due. Does it so much matter what it was we filched? Money, love, honour, trust. We, too, sooner or later, must meet agony, does it matter what form of agony? We, too, will have the power of choice, the power to choose how to meet it. And if we can see Who it is that hangs beside us, we too can have the strength to follow His example and endure. And gradually as our sense of the nearness and of the companionship of Christ grows stronger, the setting of that companionship comes to matter less and less. Does it matter, if we are with Christ in Gethsemane or on the Mountain of the Transfiguration—as long as we are with Christ? If we are with Him, why should we flinch from drinking of the chalice that He drank of, or from being baptised with that with which He was baptised? For as our sense of the Brotherhood of Christ grows stronger, so grows our sense of the Fatherhood of God. Linked to the timelessness of God, we conquer time. We conquer fear. We are undying. We

have a Father and a Father's house. Does it matter so much what may happen to us here? We are the citizens of another city, and that Jerusalem which is above is free which is our mother. We are no longer slaves to circumstances, or cowed by what other may do to us. We can be fearless because we have the freedom with which Christ has made us free. Even if we are left to stand and fight alone, like Christ forsaken in the garden, and with no other help than the words Christ uttered: 'Father, Thy will be done.'

'Thy kingdom, come, hallowed be Thy name.' Not 'my kingdom come, my name be hallowed.' Remembering Christ, we can forget ourselves. Knowing our Brother, we can join our sufferings to His passion. Knowing our Father, we can give Him what we lose. Does it matter if we lose what we most value? The very point of giving is that we care for what we give. The three Wise Men knelt before the Manger, in the dim light of the stable, among the dust and filth. They offered to the Child that lay before them their gold, their frankincense, their myrrh. What value was gold and frankincense and myrrh to a Child in swaddling clothes? What use was it to God? But it was of use to them, it was of value to them, and they gave it because it was what they most valued. They had come from a far country, they had sought Christ perhaps for what they could get, not for what they could give. But, once they had seen Christ, they gave. That was the first Epiphany, the first showing forth of God to man. The setting alters. But in each one of our lives there can be an Epiphany. We can come to Christ from that far country that we thought our home, and when at last we see Him, in the dim light of human knowing, and in the dust and filth of our own lives, then we too will kneel, we too will give what we most value, for to find Christ is to learn how to give. And to learn how to give is to learn how to endure.

GERVASE MATHEW, O.P.