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Title : What the Bible Says about the Work of Christ

Author: F.F. Bruce

Description: Who was Jesus? What did He do? What is He doing now? And what is He going to do? F.F. Bruce lets the Bible speak for itself in this illuminating introduction to the past, present, and future work of Jesus. The book is a perfect starting point for both individual and group study. Each page exhibits Bruce's spiritual maturity and his intimacy with Christ. "By his present work," says the author, "Christ gives his people the grace to endure; his future work will bring them final salvation and victory."

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[image "cover.jpg" file=images/cover.jpg] WHAT THE BIBLE

SAYS ABOUT

the WORK

of CHRIST

by

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To Margaret

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PUBLISHER'S INTRODUCTION

Who was Jesus and what did he do? These questions are right on target for understanding Jesus as a figure of history. But Christians mean more than that when they ask these questions. They go on to ask, Where did he come from? What is he doing? What is he going to do? For Christians, Jesus is the preexistent Son who became incarnate. And as the resurrected and living Christ, he continues to act, and he will yet do great things in the future.

In this book, F.F. Bruce, one of the eminent New Testament scholars of the late twentieth century, explores the New Testament teaching on the work of Christ. The lines of his argument are simple and straightforward, but like a piece of fine, handcrafted furniture, they are true to the grain and soundly constructed, even where the eye cannot see.

Here is a brief but illuminating introduction to a central strand of New Testament teaching: the past, present, and future work of Jesus. It is the perfect starting point for groups and individuals wanting to explore the fundamentals of Christ and His work.

*

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INTRODUCTION

WE SOMETIMES HEAR PREACHERS AND LECTURERS on Christian doctrine talk about “the work of Jesus” or, more fully, “the person and work of Jesus.” A study of the person of Jesus Christ undertakes to answer the question, “Who is he?” A study of his work undertakes to answer the question, “What did he do?”—or rather the three questions, “What did he do?”—“What is he doing?”— “What is he going to do?”

The Bible bears witness to Jesus from a variety of viewpoints. It bears witness to him, for example, as a historical character, who lived and died between 1900 and 2000 years ago. The New Testament opens with the four gospels, which tell of his life and work in Palestine. If that is the kind of information we are looking for when we ask “What did he do?” then the gospels will provide the answer. Some of the other New Testament writings refer back to his work on earth, and they too help to provide us with an answer along the same lines.

But the New Testament writings also bear witness to him as the one who rose from the dead and lives for evermore. We can thus ask about him in a way that we should not naturally ask about any other historical character, “What is he doing now?” and “What is he going to do?” Not only so, but the fact that he is risen and alive gives fuller meaning to the question “What did he do?”

Even this is not all. The New Testament indicates that he existed before he lived on earth as a historical character. We are thus encouraged to ask not only, “What was the mode of this earlier existence of his?” (Which is part of the question about the person of Christ), but also, “What is he said to have done in that earlier existence?” The Bible offers us quite a surprising range of answers to this question.

There are different ways in which this subject could be tackled. The way adopted here is to look first at the evidence of individual biblical authors, or groups of authors. Then, when we have considered what they have to say, we shall see if their accounts are sufficiently in agreement with one another for us to sum up what the Bible as a whole teaches about the various aspects of the work of Jesus.

CHAPTER 1

“MY FATHER’S BUSINESS”

THE WELL-KNOWN WORDS of the King James Version in which Jesus, at the age of twelve, reminded his mother that he must be about his Father’s business (Luke 2:49) may not be the best translation. Perhaps what he meant was “I must be in my Father’s house” —“Where else would you have expected me to be than in my Father’s house?” But even if the words “I must be about my Father’s business” do not convey his meaning on that occasion, they sum up very well his public activity during the last two or three years of his life on earth.

This is repeatedly emphasized in the gospel of John. There Jesus says at an early stage of his ministry, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34), while at the end of his ministry he can tell his Father, “I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4).

“You are my Son”

IN SOME TREATMENTS OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE, the work of Christ does not include an account of his earthly ministry, but there is no good reason for this omission. The earthly ministry was certainly part of the work of Christ, and even if we understand the work of Christ strictly to mean the work of the Messiah, Jesus’ earthly ministry was undoubtedly one aspect of his messianic ministry. When Peter, in the house of Cornelius at Caesarea, tells “how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38), that is as much as to say that God made him Messiah (the anointed one). The anointing in question was his baptism in Jordan by John the Baptist. At his baptism he received a special endowment of the Spirit to equip him for the ministry on which he was about to enter—a ministry which Peter, in the next words he spoke to Cornelius and his friends (Acts 10:38), summed up by describing “how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”

To restrict the work of Christ to his death and its sequel is to make a distinction—between his death and the ministry that preceded it—which the Bible does not make. His death was the crown of his ministry. If his ministry was inaugurated by his baptism in water, it reached its climax in a baptism of another kind, for more than once, looking forward to his death, Jesus spoke of it figuratively as the baptism which he had yet to undergo. His ministry, in word and action alike, proclaimed the kingdom of God, and nowhere was the essence of that kingdom more fully embodied than in him who said to his Father, “Not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42), and accepted the cross in that spirit.

From one point of view, Jesus’ baptism by John may be regarded as his public dedication to do the will of God. Matthew’s account makes this quite explicit. When John showed reluctance to baptize Jesus, saying that it would be more fitting for Jesus to baptize him, Jesus replied in words which are admirably rendered by the New English Bible, “Let it be so for the present; we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires” (Matthew 3:15). He recognized John’s ministry as a work of God and wished to identify himself with it. True, John’s baptism was a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4) and Jesus had no consciousness of

sin. Yet there may be significance in this symbolic association of himself with sinners at the beginning of his ministry, when we consider how, at the end of his ministry, he “was numbered with the transgressors” and “bore the sin of many” (in fulfillment of Isaiah 53:12).

If Jesus publicly dedicated himself in this way to do his Father’s will, then we hear the Father’s response in the words of the “voice from heaven” which came to Jesus immediately after his baptism. “He saw the heavens rent apart,” says Mark, using a vivid expression to indicate that now an answer was being given to a prayer uttered by the people hundreds of years before: “O that thou wouldst rend the heavens and come down!” (Isaiah 64:1). God was now to be actively at work on earth in the ministry of his Son. The heavenly voice which Jesus heard at the same moment said to him, “You are my Son, my beloved one; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:10, 11).

God might well express his pleasure in one who dedicated himself to the doing of his will on earth. But the words in which his pleasure was expressed carried to Jesus a message of their own. “You are my Son,” in Psalm 2:7 is an oracle addressed by God to his anointed one (his Messiah), the prince of the house of David. “My beloved one, with whom I am well pleased,” is part of God’s introduction in Isaiah 42:1 of one whom he calls “my servant.” In other words, Jesus knew himself to be hailed by God as the promised Messiah of Israel, but he knew at the same time that his role as the Messiah would have to be fulfilled by the kind of ministry assigned to the Servant in Isaiah 42 and later chapters of the same book—a ministry of obedience in humility and suffering—and not by the way of political power and military conquest which was widely envisaged in messianic expectation.

The descent of the dove

IT WAS WHILE HE HEARD THE HEAVENLY VOICE that Jesus simultaneously received the Spirit—descending on him “like a dove,” as all four gospels say. An endowment of the Spirit was associated in the prophetic writings both with the Messiah and with the Servant of the Lord. Of the coming prince of the house of David it was foretold, “the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him” (Isaiah 11:2), and when God introduces his Servant he says, “Behold my servant ... I have put my Spirit upon him” (Isaiah 42:1). It was fitting then that Jesus, in whom both roles were united, should receive this special endowment with the Spirit of God.

He not only received the Spirit for himself, but he received the authority to impart the Spirit to others. Before Jesus’ baptism, John had spoken of the coming one for whom he was preparing the way, one stronger than himself for whom he was unworthy to perform the lowliest service. “I have baptized you with water,” said John to his hearers, “but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). When he spoke these words, John did not know the identity of the coming one; it was the sign from heaven that attended Jesus’ baptism that showed him that Jesus was the one who was to fulfill his prophecy.

In the event, Jesus’ imparting of the Spirit to others did not take place until he had finished his earthly ministry—until, to use his own language, he had undergone his baptism of death. But when John spelt out what he understood by the baptism with the Spirit which the coming one would administer, he spoke in terms of a ministry of judgment. “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will

burn with unquenchable fire” (Luke 3:17). There was little enough in Jesus’ actual ministry that corresponded to this description—and this was to cause John some perplexity later on.

But we should seriously consider the possibility (and I should put it higher than a mere possibility) that Jesus deliberately absorbed in himself the baptism of judgment which, according to John, was to be administered by the coming one. This would help us to understand why he spoke of his impending suffering and death as a baptism which he had to endure, for in his suffering and death he voluntarily accepted the judgment or retribution which the sins of others had incurred.

Testing in the wilderness

IMMEDIATELY AFTER HE RECEIVED HIS MESSIANIC COMMISSION Jesus’ fidelity to it was subjected to its first test. He had been acclaimed by God as his Son. If, then, he was the Son of God, was he to exploit that relationship for his own advantage—by performing a miracle, for example, to relieve his hunger after spending forty days in the wilderness? Was he to force the hand of God—testing him to see if he really meant what he said—by throwing himself down from a height, for example, and expecting God to break his fall by supernatural intervention? Was not this, perhaps, what was meant by the scripture (Psalm 91:11, 12),

For he will give his angels charge of you

to guard you in all your ways;

on their hands they will bear you up,

lest you dash your foot against a stone.

No, it was not. On the contrary, such an action would be an instance of putting God to the test because of refusal to take him at his word, which the Israelites had been condemned for doing in another wilderness centuries before (Deuteronomy 6:16). Jesus had no doubt about the source of these temptations. They came from Satan, that malignant spirit who seduced human beings into disobeying God and then denounced them to God for their disobedience.

Equally, there could be no question of his responding to a further, and especially subtle temptation. “You are the Son of God,” said the tempter in effect; “that is, you are the Messiah, the one to whom world dominion has been promised. Think of all the good you can do when world dominion is yours. Even if it involves the use of force, which is foreign to your principles, the end will justify the means. You can put down oppression and injustice wherever it is found; you can establish universal righteousness and peace. But there is only one way to secure world dominion: it is in my gift, and you must pay me homage if you would make it yours.’

Jesus was not the first or the last to have this offer made to him. Many had heard it before and many have heard it since, and most of them have fallen for it. What made Jesus turn it down out of hand? He may have recalled that the words “You are my Son” in Psalm 2 are followed by the promise (verse 8),

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,

and the ends of the earth your possession.

If world dominion was to be his, he would receive it from his Father's hand and from no one else's. In any case, the heavenly voice had shown him that his messianic destiny was to be attained by the way of obedient and humble service and not by such a way as the tempter was likely to map out for him. So he dismissed the suggestion with the words of scripture: "You shall pay homage to the Lord your God, and serve him alone" (Deuteronomy 6:13).

This particular temptation was to recur more than once in the course of his ministry, but his prompt repudiation of it on this first occasion made it easier for him to recognize it and repel it when it was presented to him later in other forms.

The good news of the kingdom

HIS WHOLEHEARTED ACCEPTANCE OF HIS COMMISSION having thus been tested and proved, Jesus "returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee," as Luke puts it (Luke 4:14), and began to announce publicly that the appointed time for the approach of God's kingdom had now come. Generations earlier the prophet Daniel had told how, after successive pagan empires had run their course, the God of heaven would set up a kingdom which would never be superseded but would endure for ever. This kingdom would be bestowed by him on a human figure—"one like a son of man"—in close association with the "saints of the Most High" (Daniel 7:13, 18). When Jesus spoke of "the Son of Man," he meant that "one like a son of man" whom Daniel had seen in his vision; and as for the "saints of the Most High," he made their identity plain when he said to his disciples, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32).

But one who proclaims a kingdom in terms like these must be expected to do something about setting it up. Teaching and action were combined in Jesus' ministry, and the teaching and the action together showed what the nature of this new kingdom was.

There were many voices in Israel at that time proclaiming the coming kingdom in terms of militant nationalism. Judas the Galilean, who had led a rising against the Roman administration of Judaea when Jesus was a boy, had come to grief, but his soul went marching on. His followers still maintained that it was wrong for the Jewish people to pay taxes to the Roman emperor, and asserted that, if only they would rise with a will against the Romans, God would help their enterprise and enable them to drive the hated imperialists out.

The way of Jesus was quite different. It was not the self-assertive who would inherit the kingdom, he said, but the humble, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart and the peacemakers. Sorrow and suffering might be their lot at present, but they would receive a great reward. Meanwhile, the right policy was not forceful resistance but submission—turning the other cheek and going the second mile.

When was a kingdom ever established by such means as these? And when did a subject nation ever gain its freedom from oppressors by meek submission? Jesus was turning the accepted principles of political action upside down. Strictly speaking, he was being much more revolutionary than the militant nationalists. They tried to overthrow their oppressors by using their oppressors' weapons and methods—and they failed. Jesus followed in practice the way he

recommended in preaching—and he won. His disciples followed the same way throughout two and a half centuries of persecution—and they also won. (Then, having won, they began to forget the lesson they had learned—but that is another story.)

A question and its answer

JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS NOT A MILITANT NATIONALIST. But even he found something strange in the reports that came to him about what Jesus was saying and doing. He could not go and hear for himself, for he was in prison. He had been arrested and locked up by one of the Herods, the ruler of Galilee and some territory east of the Jordan, for denouncing Herod's second marriage as disobedience to the law of God (since his second wife's former husband, his own half-brother, was still alive). But John's disciples were able to come and visit him in prison, and he sent two of them to Jesus with the question "Are you really the coming one, or must we look for someone else?" (Luke 7:19.) John had foretold a ministry of judgment for the coming one, and by all accounts this was not the kind of ministry that Jesus was engaged in. John had proclaimed Jesus as the coming one; had he been mistaken? And perhaps another question rose in John's mind: "If he is really the coming one, why does he not do something for me in my imprisonment?"

So John's disciples came to Jesus with their master's question. Jesus might have said to them, "Yes; go back and tell John that I am certainly the coming one." But that would scarcely have satisfied John, who might have said to himself, "Ah, but perhaps he himself is mistaken!" Jesus gave John's messengers a better answer than that. "You stay here and watch," he said to them.

They stayed and watched. And as they did so, says Luke, Jesus "cured many of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many that were blind he bestowed sight" (Luke 7:21). Then he said to them (verse 22),

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them.

And, he added (verse 23), tell him this from me, "Blessed is the man who doesn't think that I have let him down."

When the two disciples went back to John, he would have gotten the message all right. Sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf, strength for the cripple—these were the very things that the prophets had said would mark the new age when it came, and these were the very things that Jesus was doing! John could have called to mind a prophecy like that in Isaiah 35:5-6:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

then shall the lame man leap like a hart,

and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy,

and he would have recognized that this was exactly what was happening now.

And as for the bringing of good news to the poor, there was another passage in the same book (Isaiah 61:1-2), which Jesus on another occasion applied to himself:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor [or afflicted];

he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to those who are fettered;

to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

The prophet goes on immediately to add, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” But when Jesus read this passage one Sabbath day early on in his ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth, he stopped short at “the acceptable year of the LORD.” If he had gone on to read “and the day of vengeance of our God,” he could not have begun his following address by saying, as he did, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21), for he had come as the messenger, and indeed the embodiment of God’s favor, not of his vengeance. John the Baptist might have wished to hear from his messengers at least something about “the day of vengeance of our God,” but he heard enough to assure him that Jesus was indeed the coming one. He had not been mistaken; Jesus had not let him down.

Works of mercy and power

THE WORKS OF MERCY AND POWER which marked Jesus’ ministry— his miracles, as they are commonly called—were not simply wonders performed in order to impress his hearers with his authority. They gave evidence of his authority, of course, but so did his words. Whereas the prophets in earlier days said “Thus says the Lord” and the scribes of his own day quoted revered teachers of a past generation, here was one who was content to say, “I say to you,” sometimes solemnly emphasizing these words by prefacing “Amen”—meaning “in truth” or, as the older English versions rendered it, “verily.” His words and his deeds were all of a piece. A poet does not write poetry to prove that he is a poet; he writes it because he is a poet. Just so, Jesus performed his mighty works not to prove that he was the Son of God but because he was the Son of God. They were, as someone has put it, not the seals on the document guaranteeing its genuineness; they were part of the text itself. That is to say, they were as much part of the message of the kingdom of God as the teaching was. If the teaching was largely given in spoken parables, the mighty works were acted parables, setting forth the same lessons.

There was a rival kingdom to the kingdom of God, and that was the kingdom of darkness and sin, whose agents were spiritual forces. The announcement of the imminence of God’s kingdom caused consternation among those forces, which had formerly dominated the minds of many men

and women and now saw their domination threatened. This led to a redoubling of their activity in human life, which explains why so many of Jesus' acts of healing took the form of expelling demons from those whom they controlled. Many of the conditions which the gospels describe in these terms would be described otherwise by psychiatrists and other medical specialists today, but the fact that they are now referred to by a different vocabulary does not diminish their reality. If we refer to them in the vocabulary which the gospels use, we shall see more clearly their relevance to Jesus' message of the kingdom. Any form of disease or premature death in God's world was an affront to his love, but this form of illness was the greatest affront of all, because it was evidence of the determination of the powers of evil not to yield to the new kingdom without a struggle.

Jesus summed up the situation by means of a short parable: "When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace; but when one stronger than himself attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted, and divides his goods as plunder" (Luke 11:21-22). The "strong man" was the chief ruler of the kingdom of evil, whom the Jews in their language called Beelzebul (meaning something like "lord of the palace"). His palace had formerly been secure, but now the stronger power of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus was breaking into his palace, binding him, seizing his property and, best of all, releasing his captives. This was a sure sign that the kingdom of God was at work. "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons," said Jesus, "then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28).

Some of the leaders in Israel were unwilling to acknowledge the divine authority by which Jesus acted, and put his mighty works down to the power of Beelzebul operating through him. This was a manifest absurdity, as it was the power of Beelzebul that was being broken by Jesus' works. But if men who ought to have known better closed their eyes to the light and refused to admit the evidence of the Spirit of God at work among them, then there was no hope for them. (This is what is meant by the unpardonable sin, which has caused much unnecessary anxiety to some people of tender conscience.)

Some of Jesus' mighty works took the form of control over other aspects of nature than human life and health. When he quieted the storm on the lake of Galilee his disciples were filled with awe, and said, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mark 4:41). The story is told in such a way as to suggest that he commanded the power which God had displayed in his works of creation and in delivering his people from Egypt. When the Creator caused the dry land to emerge from the water, he curbed the unruly sea and said, "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed" (Job 38:11). When he caused the water of the Red Sea (or rather "the sea of reeds") to recede so as to let the Israelites escape from Egypt, he exerted the same power. Now Jesus exerts it too and lets it be seen that the creative and delivering power of God is at his disposal. Not only so, but Jesus' power to control the outward raging of natural forces was matched immediately afterwards by his power to control the inward raging of human passion in his healing of the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20).

The feeding of the multitude in the wilderness (Mark 6:30-44) again showed that the power of God, who had fed his people in another wilderness during their pilgrimage from Egypt to the promised land, was at work in Jesus. The gospel of John makes it plain that Jesus' feeding of the five thousand with loaves and fishes, like God's feeding of the Israelites with manna in Moses'

day, was an object lesson pointing (in John Masefield's words) to

the holy bread

By which the soul of man is fed,

The holy bread, the food unpriced,

Thine everlasting mercy, Christ!

(“The Everlasting Mercy,” John Masefield)

The lesson taught by the miraculous feeding is summed up thus by Jesus: “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35.)

‘You are the Messiah’

JESUS' FEEDING OF THE MULTITUDE was the occasion for the renewal of one of his earlier temptations—the temptation to fulfill his messianic mission by another course than that which was the Father's will for him. The five thousand men who had been fed were a potential army looking for a captain—that is probably what Jesus meant when he described them as “sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). Now, they thought, they had found the captain for whom they were looking. They tried to take Jesus by force and make him their king, to lead them against the Roman oppressors and their creatures, the Herods (John 6:15). The situation was a delicate one. Jesus could not trust his own closest disciples, who were in danger of being infected by the crowd's militant enthusiasm, and he had to compel them to embark in their boat and cross to the other side of the lake of Galilee, while he stayed behind and persuaded the crowd to disperse.

They did disperse, but many of them felt disillusioned. Here was a potential leader with obvious power at his disposal. If only he would consent to use that power in the national interest, nothing could stand in his way. But when he refused to seize such a golden opportunity, many had no further use for him. This crisis marked the end of his popularity in Galilee.

Taking his disciples away from Galilee, out of reach of the nationalist influences to which they were so ready to respond, he taught them more of the true nature of his messianic mission, in which they had their part to play. At last he tested their understanding of his teaching, and asked them who they thought he really was. When Peter, acting as spokesman for his companions, said, “You are the Messiah,” this was a significant confession. If Jesus was the Messiah, it meant that a radical change had come about in their previous ideas of the sort of person the Messiah was and the kind of things he would do. For Jesus did not correspond to popular ideas about the Messiah, and showed no sign of undertaking the kind of program which many hoped the Messiah would accomplish.

Peter's confession thus gave evidence of a shift—or at least the beginnings of a shift—in the picture of the Messiah held by him and the other disciples. But he and they had a long way to go yet, and this became clear almost immediately.

It was now that Jesus began to talk to them plainly about what lay in store for him: not worldly

triumph and coronation, but repudiation, suffering and death: “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected” (Mark 8:31). If they thought they were following him to national liberation and the eager acclaim of a grateful people, let them think again. To follow him meant taking up the cross—and “taking up the cross” was no empty figure of speech in first-century Palestine.

Whatever new conception of messianic destiny they had begun to associate with their Master, it was nothing like this. The first time he spoke to them in these terms Peter, who had just confessed him to be the Messiah, took him by the arm and said earnestly, “God bless you, Master! This is never going to happen to you!” Jesus replied to this well-meant expostulation with what must have been surprising severity: “Get behind me, Satan! These are men’s thoughts, not God’s” (Mark 8:33).

What did he mean? He certainly did not identify Peter with the personal devil. No, but he recognized in Peter’s well-intentioned remonstrance the same old temptation as he had encountered and resisted in the wilderness—the temptation to achieve his messianic destiny by another way than the Servant’s way of rejection and suffering. He repelled it now with the same words as he had used to repel it then. Nothing must turn him aside from completing “his Father’s business.”

From this point on, the way of Jesus’ ministry becomes more and more clearly the way of the cross.

CHAPTER 2

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

AT QUITE AN EARLY STAGE IN HIS MINISTRY Jesus began to find himself at odds with the religious and political authorities.

Conflict with the religious authorities

CONFLICT WITH THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES arose first of all from Jesus' insistence on healing people on the Sabbath day, even during synagogue services. The law of the Sabbath was laid down in the fourth of the ten commandments. The fourth commandment directed the Israelites not to do any work on the Sabbath day. At one time everyone had a fairly clear idea of what was meant by "work" in this sense, but with changes in conditions of life, it became necessary to define "work" more precisely. In some Jewish teaching there were set forth thirty-nine forms of activity which were to be regarded as "work" forbidden on the Sabbath day. For example, reaping grain and grinding it were two of these activities. When fault was found with Jesus' disciples for plucking ears of grain as they walked through the fields on the Sabbath and rubbing them between their hands to extract the kernel, it was because plucking was reckoned to be a form of reaping, and rubbing a form of grinding.

As for healing people on the Sabbath, the exponents of the law were not unreasonable. If it was a matter of life or death, if delay would be dangerous, then by all means, they agreed, the saving of life should take precedence over the Sabbath law. But if sick or disabled persons could easily wait until sunset, when the new day officially started, then let them wait.

But Jesus said, "Why should they wait?" A law of God could best be obeyed by the fulfillment of the purpose for which it was given. Now the Sabbath was given for the rest and relief of human beings, and anything which promoted that end was a proper thing to do on the Sabbath. By curing people he gave them rest and relief from disease and pain, and the Sabbath was the most fitting day for such activity.

This reasoning was persuasive and attractive, but many of the religious leaders found it subversive. Jesus, in their eyes, had no authority to act or teach as he did; he was undermining established authority and was a dangerous influence.

In Galilee and Jerusalem alike it was this attitude of his towards the Sabbath that first involved him in conflict. John tells in his gospel how Jesus, during a visit to Jerusalem, cured a cripple on the Sabbath day at the Pool of Bethesda. When he was challenged for his alleged breach of the law of God, he gave an astounding reply: "My Father is working still, and I am working" (John 5:17).

This reply might well have reminded his hearers of a subject which lent itself to grave debate. Did God himself desist from all work on the Sabbath day, as his people were commanded to do? True, when creation's work was finished, the scriptural narrative told how "he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done" (Genesis 2:2). But it was plain that, when he

rested from his creative work, he did not rest from his work of providence, from maintaining the creation in being, either then or on any subsequent Sabbath day. If he did, then inevitably the universe would dissolve into nothingness, and would have to be created all over again at the beginning of each new week. So, it was generally agreed, God kept on working all the time, Sabbath day or no Sabbath day.

What made Jesus' reply so astounding, however, was that he claimed this example of God as a precedent for himself to follow. Not only so, but he spoke of God as "my Father" in a way which suggested that he stood in a special relation to God. What the Son sees the Father doing, it is his right and indeed his duty to do. If the Son sees the Father working on the Sabbath, it is for him to work on the Sabbath too. But this, his hearers decided, was intolerable; he was in effect putting himself on a level with God. This was as near to blasphemy as made no difference—and blasphemy was a capital offense in Jewish law. His bold claim was not forgotten. It was brought up against him on each subsequent occasion when he visited Jerusalem for one or another of the great festivals, and on his last visit it figured in his trial and condemnation.

Conflict with Herod Antipas

IT WAS NOT ONLY WITH THE RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES that Jesus came into conflict. In Galilee—where he proclaimed the new kingdom and performed so many of his mighty works—the ruler there became more and more suspicious of him and his companions. This was Herod Antipas, who had imprisoned John the Baptist and later ordered his execution. Now it seemed to Herod that in Jesus he was faced with another John the Baptist, and that he might have to take the same drastic measures against him. Apart from anything else, Herod was held responsible by the Roman emperor for maintaining peace in his principality, and he could not afford to risk any movement which might develop into a popular rising. He had his informants everywhere, and would know all about those who envisaged Jesus as the military leader for whom so many were waiting. When Jesus sent his disciples out two by two to announce the good news of the coming kingdom in the towns and villages of Galilee, Herod would hear of the excitement which their mission caused. The feeding of the multitude, after which an attempt was made to compel Jesus to assume the kingship, took place on the east side of the lake of Galilee, outside Herod's territory. But the men who made the attempt were Herod's subjects. No wonder that some well-disposed Pharisees warned Jesus to get out of Galilee, for, they said, "Herod wants to kill you" (Luke 13:31). This was the occasion which called forth Jesus' description of Herod as "that fox." He was not greatly alarmed by the warning. Herod could not touch him before his work was done, and even then it was not in Herod's territory that he would face the final crisis, for "it would never do for a prophet to perish away from Jerusalem."

Nevertheless he did leave Galilee at that time and took his disciples out of Herod's reach to give them the instruction that was necessary to prepare them for what lay ahead of them on their next visit to Jerusalem. The territory through which they passed at this time mostly belonged to Herod's brother Philip ("Philip the tetrarch"), but the majority of Philip's subjects were Gentiles, and there was not the same danger of Jewish national enthusiasm boiling over there as there was in Galilee. Philip's capital was at Caesarea Philippi, near one of the sources of the Jordan, and it was in that neighborhood that Peter made his historic confession of Jesus as the Messiah.

Conflict in Jerusalem

AS WE HAVE SEEN, PETER'S CONFESSIOIN gave Jesus the cue to tell his disciples about his impending rejection and death. And not long afterwards he and his disciples set out on the road to Jerusalem, the most appropriate place in the world (as he said) for a prophet to meet his fate. Jerusalem must hear the good news of the kingdom of God as Galilee had heard it, but Jesus had no illusions about the reception which Jerusalem was likely to give to him and his message. If his message were accepted, it would prove to be the way of peace, but there were forces at work in Jerusalem which would lead to the rejection of the way of peace and thus ensure the ruin of the city and its inhabitants.

The Jewish authorities themselves were well aware of those forces, which were set on a collision course with the Roman military occupation. Those Jewish authorities, at whose head stood the chief priests, were desperately anxious to hold the rebellious forces at bay. Their own position, they knew, depended on the maintenance of peaceful relations with the Roman administration, and if those peaceful relations were disrupted, they themselves would be swept away in the ensuing catastrophe.

But they were far from recognizing an ally in Jesus with his message of peace. There was, indeed, nothing in common between Jesus' policy of repaying evil with good and the conviction held by the militant patriots that the only good Roman was a dead one. But Jesus was the sort of leader who attracted a following of the common people, and however innocent his own motives might be, such a following as he attracted was likely to arouse the suspicion of the Romans. Public safety might therefore require that Jesus should be put out of harm's way.

Jesus spent some time teaching in the temple precincts during the week of the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn of A.D. 29, and again during the Feast of Dedication at mid-winter, but the crowds that thronged him during those festivals provided a kind of bodyguard which made it inexpedient to take any action against him. For the next three months Jesus withdrew with his disciples to a quiet spot in the wilderness of Judaea. From there he emerged briefly to provide urgently needed help to a family at Bethany, near Jerusalem, with whom he had enjoyed hospitality on his visits to the capital. Lazarus, a member of the family, had died, and Jesus' action in calling him out of the rock tomb in which he had been interred and restoring him alive to his two sisters, inevitably made a tremendous impression in the whole area.

When, therefore, the Feast of Passover approached a few weeks later and Jesus went to Jerusalem for the last time, he was escorted by a cheering band of pilgrims who clearly thought that the kingdom of God was on the point of being established. Indeed it was, but in quite a different sense from anything that they envisaged. The chief priests' apprehensions seemed to them to be only too well founded. Jesus himself was mounted on a donkey, not a war-horse; he came in peace and not with armed force. But it was all too easy for such a crowd to get out of hand.

Evidently, however, there was nothing about his entry into Jerusalem which moved the Romans to intervene. A crowd of unarmed country folk escorting a man riding on a donkey, waving branches and clothes about and yelling their heads off, did not seem to present any military threat. Even when Jesus went into the outer court of the temple the following day and drove out the cattle dealers and money changers who had recently—and perhaps only temporarily—installed themselves there, the Romans took no action. They would certainly have done so if this

had been a demonstration of mob violence. There was a strong Roman garrison in the Antonia fortress, adjoining the temple on the northwest and communicating with the outer court by two flights of steps. If any riotous behavior broke out in the temple precincts, a detachment of troops would be down at the double and a few sword thrusts to the right and left would quickly have dispersed the rioters. Indeed, something of the sort took place a few months earlier, to judge by the reference in Luke 13:1 to certain Galileans “whose blood Pilate [the Roman governor of Judaea] had mingled with their sacrifices.” That incident must have taken place in the Jerusalem temple, for that was the only place where sacrifices could be offered. But on this occasion there was no Roman intervention—plainly because the situation did not seem to call for it.

Jesus’ cleansing of the temple was not intended to be an act of violence, whether against the temple itself, the Jewish establishment, or the Roman occupation. It was the kind of “prophetic action” which prophets in earlier days had sometimes performed to drive home more forcibly their spoken messages. “Is it not written,” Jesus protested (quoting Isaiah 56:7), “‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But,” he added (quoting from another prophet; see next page), “you have made it a den of robbers.” The outer court of the temple was sometimes called the court of the Gentiles. Gentiles were strictly debarred from entering the inner courts, which were accessible to Jews only, but they might come into the outer court and worship the true God there. If, however, the place where they might do so was taken up by traders and money changers, then they were being robbed of their opportunity of approaching God and God was being robbed of their worship.

When Jesus said that the house of God had been turned into a den of robbers, he echoed language used by the prophet Jeremiah in the name of God over 600 years before, with regard to Solomon’s temple: “Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?” (Jeremiah 7:11). Jeremiah had warned his hearers that the temple which they were desecrating would be destroyed—as indeed it was, by the Babylonians a few years later. In Jesus’ protest there was at least the implication that a similar fate lay in store for that even more glorious temple in which he then stood. Jeremiah’s words nearly cost him his life, and Jesus might be incurring a similar risk. A day or two later he sat with some of his disciples on the slope of Mount Olivet, looking across to the temple area with its magnificent buildings, and told them that the time was approaching when not one stone would be left standing on another; all would be demolished. His disciples would not be the only people to hear what he said. When Judaea became a Roman province in A.D.. 6, the Romans deprived the Jewish authorities of the right to inflict capital punishment—except with regard to offenses against the sanctity of the temple, whether by deed or by word.

The question of taxation

ANOTHER CHANGE THAT CAME ABOUT when Judaea was reorganized as a Roman province in A.D.. 6 was that its inhabitants had to pay their taxes directly to the imperial exchequer in Rome. Taxes were burdensome no matter to whom they were paid, and the public tax collectors were often quite unscrupulous in extorting more than they should from the taxpayers. We need not suppose that Galileans paid less tax to Herod Antipas than Judaeans paid to the emperor, but at least Herod Antipas was a Jew, while the emperor was a pagan. When the new order imposed in A.D.. 6 required the Judaeans to pay taxes to the emperor, Judas the Galilean proclaimed a doctrine that had not been heard in Jewish circles before—that for them,

the chosen people of God, to pay taxes to a pagan ruler was sacrilege. Judas led a rising which was quickly put down by Roman soldiers, but his doctrine lived on. It was a congenial doctrine. No one liked having to pay taxes to Rome, and it was good to think that this dislike had a sound religious basis. Of course they had to continue paying taxes to Rome whether they liked it or not, whether it was pleasing to heaven or not. If any reluctance was shown, the Romans had ruthless methods of compulsion. But the question was always sure to arouse animated discussion, and the patriotism and (from some points of view) the orthodoxy of a visiting teacher could be tested by his attitude on this point.

Naturally, then, while Jesus was teaching in the temple precincts two or three days after his arrival in Jerusalem, a deputation waited on him to put this question to him. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" When they said "Is it lawful?" they were referring not (of course) to Roman law, which demanded payment, but to the law of God.

Was Jesus to answer yes or no? If he said yes, he would lose much of his current popularity. If he said no, he could be denounced to Pilate, the Roman governor, for fomenting sedition—and there could be only one outcome to such a denunciation. "Let me see a coin," he said, meaning the silver Roman coin, about the size of a shilling (5p) or a quarter, and called a denarius. (It was in Roman coinage that the imperial taxes were paid.) "Now," he said, when one was produced, "whose face is this? Whose name is this?" Just as British coins bear the face and name of the monarch, so a Roman denarius bore the face and name of Caesar (as every Roman emperor was called). To his question there could be only one answer: the coin bore Caesar's face and name. "Well," said he, "give Caesar back what belongs to him; but see to it that you give God what is due to him" (Mark 12:13-17).

Perhaps his answer implied that a truly pious Jew should not have such a coin on his person. Because it bore Caesar's image, it infringed the second commandment, which forbade "any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath" (Exodus 20:4). There were some scrupulously religious Jews who would not even look at such a coin, let alone possess one. We cannot be sure if Jesus had this in mind. He did mean that the claims of God upon his people would not be diminished if Caesar were to be given money which so obviously belonged to him. Caesar's money was properly used in paying Caesar's taxes but, as Jesus had said during his Galilean ministry, God's kingdom and righteousness should be sought first, and then everything else would fall into its proper place.

Certainly Jesus said nothing on this delicate subject which could form the basis of a charge against him before the Roman governor. But he may well have lost the good will of many of the bystanders, whether they were residents in Jerusalem or pilgrims up from Galilee. The hopes of a coup which some of them had cherished when they shouted "Hosanna" at his entry into the city had now evaporated. They may have expected him then to lead them into the temple precincts and institute the new kingdom by taking over the holy area in the name of God. He had done no such thing. His "cleansing" of the temple was probably popular enough, but it was not directed against the Romans. And now, by refusing to denounce the payment of taxes to Caesar, he had shown clearly that he was not the leader they wanted. They were completely disillusioned in him, as the militant Galileans had been when he refused to be their king after the feeding of the multitude.

The last supper

EVEN IF POPULAR SUPPORT FOR JESUS WAS WANING, the chief priests did not think it wise to take any action against him during the festival season. If a riot were inadvertently sparked off, they would be bringing about the very crisis they were so anxious to avoid. But, for some inexplicable reason, one of Jesus' disciples—Judas Iscariot—secured an audience with them a couple of days before the passover, and undertook to enable them to arrest Jesus quietly, in circumstances where there would be no risk of a riot.

Jesus knew very well that there was a traitor in the camp, and planned his movements for the next twenty-four hours with special care. He could see the danger which was closing in on him, but he had resolved to keep the passover with his disciples for one last time before he was arrested. There were some variations in calculating the calendar at that time, and there are grounds for thinking that he kept the passover with his disciples twenty-four hours before the official date. However that may be, he had made the necessary arrangements to keep it in the upper room of a trusted friend in Jerusalem, and on the appointed evening he met his twelve chief disciples there.

The passover commemorated a great deliverance which the God of Israel had accomplished for his people more than a thousand years before. The celebrants did their best to imagine themselves in the place of their ancestors observing the first passover on the eve of their escape from Egypt. Thus, when they were about to eat the unleavened bread which formed an essential part of the meal, the head of the family or leader of the company said, "This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate when they came out of Egypt." On this occasion, however, Jesus gave a new significance to the bread when he took it from the table, gave thanks to God for it, broke it and gave it to his disciples with the words, "Take it; this is my body."

When a blessing was said at the end of the meal, it was customary to share a cup of wine which was called "the cup of blessing." When they were about to do so on this occasion, Jesus took the cup and, after saying the blessing over it, gave it to his disciples. "This is my covenant blood," he told them, "which is poured out for many. In truth I tell you, I shall not drink the fruit of the vine again until I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:22-25).

What the disciples could have understood by those words at the time is difficult to decide. In the light of the events which were to follow immediately afterwards, the words and the accompanying actions acquired a much fuller significance for them than they could have had at that supper table. But if we can discover what Jesus meant by them, we may understand in some measure how he viewed his impending death.