

## ECUMENISM WITH EVANGELICALS

Lanckorona, Poland: January 23 - 25, 2014

### Talk 4: The Cross and the Resurrection, Suffering and Healing, Poverty and Prosperity

Evangelical Christians have always emphasized the cross. Many of their hymns honour the cross and the blood of Jesus shed on Calvary. For Evangelicals, the cross was preached as the price Jesus paid for our sins. It was at the heart of the appeal for repentance and conversion. This characterized all classical Evangelical preaching. A similar preaching was also found among Catholics. But among Catholics, this preaching of the cross was especially the mark of parish missions preached by religious priests, particularly from orders dedicated to the cross and redemption (such as the Redemptorists, the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer and the Passionists, the Congregation of the Passion, both founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century); it was rarely the regular preaching week by week in the parishes. Nonetheless, a focus on the suffering and death of Jesus is one feature found in both Evangelical and Catholic traditions.

But one major difference was that Evangelicals were strongly allergic to any idea of sharing in the sufferings of Christ. For them, it is by Christ's wounds that we are healed, and we can add nothing. By contrast, Catholics have regularly been encouraged to see their sufferings as a sharing in the sufferings of Christ. A verse from Colossians was often cited: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." (Col. 1:24). However, in the New Testament, the sufferings of Paul and others referred to in this way were sufferings endured because of their faith, the sufferings that often led to martyrdom. There is no mention in the New Testament of offering up the sufferings of sickness for example. By contrast, some charismatic Christians today think that the substitutionary death of Jesus means that he died so that we do not have to suffer. Here we have a characteristic Catholic - Evangelical contrast: Catholics think readily of **participation** (we share in the life of Jesus) while Evangelicals are suspicious of participation as making ourselves co-saviours; they think of **substitution** of what Jesus did for us, of how he took our place.

Before taking up the question of sickness and healing, it is necessary to say something about the Resurrection of Jesus. In the New Testament, it is clear that the Good News at the beginning was that Jesus is risen. The Eastern Orthodox tradition has always had a strong understanding of the Resurrection, linked to the central role of the liturgy in their life. By contrast, the Western tradition did not give a lot of attention to the resurrection. The most striking sign of this was the celebration for centuries of the liturgy of the Easter Vigil on the Saturday morning with only clergy present. In the West, it was the liturgical movement from the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that began to emphasize again the centrality of the resurrection. At the same time, biblical scholars were showing its centrality in the New Testament - one book that had a major influence was *The Resurrection* by Fr F-X. Durrwell.

During the centuries that neglected the resurrection, there was much emphasis on suffering. This also reflected the harshness of life for many peoples - poverty, famine, plagues, infant mortality, wars - in "this vale of tears". In the West there developed a spirituality of suffering linking the Christian experience of suffering to the sufferings of Jesus. A powerful symbol of this was the stigmata of St Francis, bearing the sufferings of Jesus in his body. The dominant idea here was not being freed from suffering but suffering becoming our way to God.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some Protestants begin to rediscover the Christian ministry of healing. This was often in the context of the quest for holiness, with holiness being understood as the perfection of wholeness. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the Pentecostal movement, the gifts of healing reappear with the other spiritual gifts like prophecy and speaking in tongues. A teaching becomes widespread among Pentecostals that physical healing is included in the atonement: “By his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24). They reacted against the idea that the normal Christian life has to include constant suffering. When the charismatic renewal began, the ministry of healing comes into the older Churches, including the Catholic Church. Among Anglicans and Catholics healing also extends to inner healing, healing of the emotions. This development also reflected the more middle class context of much Catholic and Anglican renewal, at least in North America and Europe. At the same time, i.e. the last fifty years, the technological and scientific advances in medicine and in care of the sick and the dying we have in the Western world a culture in which people assume that a normal life is pain free. We easily forget the enormous suffering in other parts of the world.

Now let us return to the cross and the resurrection. From the 1950s and the 1960s, there is a new understanding of the centrality of the resurrection in the Gospel message. This is mediated by biblical teaching and by renewal of the liturgy. Then comes the charismatic renewal with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the crucified and risen Lord. In the first years of the Renewal, one prominent slogan, often printed on banners and celebrated in song, was “Jesus is Lord.” So in the song: “He is Lord, he is Lord, he is risen from the dead, and he is Lord.” (based on Phil. 2:6-11).

The combination of several elements - the rediscovery of the centrality of the resurrection in the New Testament, the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit, the development of the ministry of healing, the ready availability for many of pain-relieving drugs or therapy - these have combined among many Western Christians to turn our attention away from the cross of Calvary. So it can happen that we talk about the Resurrection and Pentecost without mentioning the cross and the death. Then we lose the power, and we lose the anchoring in reality.

I am not saying that we cannot “offer up” our suffering in union with Jesus. As Christians, we can live everything in Jesus, except our sin. But the New Testament perspective, along with the restoration of healing in the resurrection, means that we are called upon to discern: when we begin to suffer, is this something the Lord wants me to accept by consciously uniting myself to Jesus, or is it something I should resist in calling on the victory of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection?

### Victory, Success and Prosperity

For the older Evangelicals, the cross was central to the Gospel. New life only through the cross. This was always the message of Billy Graham. The first Pentecostals did not move away from this - they often sang about the Blood. For them, the victory was the victory of Jesus over sin, Satan, and death on the cross. But over the last century of Pentecostal expansion, this focus has become endangered. So there has been a growing emphasis on success. To have the Holy Spirit is to have success - success in evangelism, in church planting, in church growth, in ministry, in healing, in finances, in family life. Much of this is a subversion of the Christian message by consumerist capitalism and the American dream. To see the danger, we only have to ask: was the cross a success? Did Jesus have a successful ministry?

It is important to understand that the success-prosperity emphasis was not a part of classical Evangelical revivals nor was it present in the early years of the Pentecostal movement. It is in many ways a product of consumerist capitalism and of economic conditions. It has spread widely in new Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa, but there it has a somewhat different character from the prosperity gospel in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

What can Catholics learn from the prosperity teaching? The biblical passages appealed to by prosperity teachers are mostly from the Old Testament. Through the law of Moses God sought to make Israel a holy people (Lev 19:2). Part of this schooling was to learn that obedience leads to blessing, and disobedience leads to all kinds of disasters (see for example Deut 28). So this teaching is not without some biblical foundation.

I am thinking that the figure of King Solomon is significant here. While David has always been an iconic figure for the Jewish people, the picture of the righteous king, Solomon has been highly regarded too. But the biblical narrative concerning Solomon is in many ways ambivalent. Solomon is renowned for his wisdom and his riches. Later wisdom literature in Israel is linked with Solomon (See Prov. 1: 1; 25: 1; Ecclesiastes 1: 1; the Song of Solomon; the Wisdom of Solomon). The account of Solomon in 2 Chronicles is more laudatory than that in 1 Kings. He is crowning example of prosperity: see the account of the visit of the Queen of Sheba and the wealth of Solomon (2 Chr. 9). Solomon's reign appears as the summit of Israel's greatness. But it turns sour, Solomon is seduced from his love of the Lord by the love of foreign women and the worship of their gods. The apparent glory of Solomon's reign is turned to ashes: immediately following his death, the kingdom is divided and decline follows. See 1 Kings 11: 1 - 13.

To receive the biblical revelation means receiving the whole story of Israel from Abraham through David and Solomon to Jesus and the Twelve. Being blessed by God as a fruit of obedience to God is part of this message. But the biblical message continues after Solomon to show how disobedience leads to disaster, but then how the suffering of Israel under these disasters then becomes God's instrument for the overcoming of evil.

In the Christian era, no one lives simply in the realm of blessing. We are as Christians baptized into the death of Jesus. As disciples we follow in the steps of the master: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt. 5: 11 - 12). "Resist him [the devil], firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world." (1 Peter 5: 9). It is interesting that Pope Francis when he is speaking of spiritual ecumenism is talking about an ecumenism of suffering. "For persecutors, we are not divided, we are not Lutherans, Orthodox, Evangelicals, Catholics... No! We are one in their eyes! For persecutors we are Christians! They are not interested in anything else. This is the ecumenism of blood that we experience today." (Address to Catholic Fraternity of Charismatic Covenant Communities, October 2014).

So coming back to what we can learn from prosperity teaching, I suggest the following points:

1. We can learn the importance of submitting the realm of money, finances, property, and possessions to the Lordship of Jesus. We should include here the charismatic dimensions of hearing from the Lord, faith in the power of the Holy Spirit - the power that can create out of nothing. We should learn not to dismiss financial and business matters as unspiritual, so that we only pray about holy spiritual things.

2. We can learn that when God blesses us in abundance, He does so in order that we may share His goodness with others. This desire to share God's goodness and blessings is what marks out a Christian approach from one that is justifying greed and acquisitiveness.

This is an important example of how even in a teaching that can seem far from the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, there is still something to be learned. Unbalanced teaching often arises because of some truth that is being forgotten, some area of God's revelation is being neglected.