



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

Wednesday, 29 October 2008

Saint Paul (10)

The Importance of Christology: the Theology of the Cross.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the personal experience of St Paul there is an incontrovertible factor: while he was at first a persecutor and perpetrated violence against Christians, from the moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus he switched to the side of the Crucified Christ, making Christ his *raison d'être* and the reason for his preaching. His was a life neither quiet nor free from dangers and difficulties, but spent entirely for souls (cf. 2 Cor 12: 15). In his encounter with Jesus the central significance of the Cross had been made clear to him: he understood that Jesus *had died and rose for all* and for himself. Both these things were important; universality: Jesus really died for all, and subjectivity: he also died for me. Thus God's freely given and merciful love had been made manifest in the Cross. Paul experienced this love in himself first of all (cf. Gal 2: 20) and from being a sinner he became a believer, from a persecutor an apostle. Day after day, in his new life, he experienced that salvation was "grace", that everything derived from the death of Christ and not from his own merit, which moreover did not exist. The "Gospel of grace" thus became for him the only way of understanding the Cross, not only the criterion of his new existence but also his response to those who questioned him. First and foremost among these were the Jews who put their hope in deeds and from these hoped for salvation; then there were the Greeks who challenged the Cross with their human knowledge; lastly, there were those groups of heretics who had forged their own idea of Christianity to suit their own model of life.

For St Paul the Cross has a fundamental primacy in the history of humanity; it represents the focal point of his theology because to say "Cross" is to say *salvation as grace* given to every creature. The topic of the Cross of Christ becomes an essential and primary element of the Apostle's preaching: the clearest example concerns the community of Corinth. Facing a Church in which disorder and scandal were disturbingly present, where communion was threatened by internal factions and ruptures which damaged the unity of the Body of Christ, Paul did not present himself with sublime words or wisdom but with the proclamation of Christ, of Christ crucified. His strength is not in the use of persuasive language but, paradoxically, in the weakness and trepidation of those who entrust themselves solely to the "power of God" (cf. 1 Cor 2: 1-5). The Cross, for all it represents, hence also for the theological message it contains, is scandal and folly. The Apostle says so with an impressive force that it is good to hear directly from his words: "for the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1: 18-23).

The first Christian communities that Paul addressed knew well that Jesus was henceforth alive and risen; the Apostle does not only want to remind the Corinthians or the Galatians but also all of us that the Risen One is always the One who has been crucified. The "stumbling block" and "folly" of the Cross lie in the very fact that where there seems to be nothing but failure, sorrow and defeat, there is the full power of God's boundless love, for the Cross is an expression of love and love is the true power that is revealed precisely in this seeming weakness. For the Jews, the Cross is *skandalon*, that is, a snare or a stumbling block. It seems to hinder the faith of the devout Israelite who finds it difficult to discover anything like it in the Sacred Scriptures. With some courage, Paul seems to be saying that here the stakes at play are high: in the opinion of the Jews the Cross contradicts the very essence of God who manifested himself in wonderful signs. To accept the Cross of Christ therefore means bringing about a profound conversion in the way of relating to God. If, for the Jews, the reason for rejecting the Cross is found in Revelation, that is, the faithfulness to the God of the Fathers, for the Greeks, that is, the Gentiles, the criterion of judgement for opposing the Cross is reason. Indeed, the Cross for the latter is *moría*, folly, literally *ignorance*, that is, saltless food; thus, rather than an error, it is an insult to common sense.

Paul himself, on more than one occasion had the bitter experience of the rejection of the Christian proclamation, considered "insipid", devoid of importance, not even worthy of being taken into consideration at the level of rational logic. For those who, like the Greeks, see perfection in the spirit, in pure thought, it was already unacceptable that God should become man, immersing himself in all the limitations of space and time. Then for them it was definitely inconceivable to believe that a God could end on a Cross! And we see that this Greek logic is also the common logic of our time. How could the concept of *apátheia*, indifference, as an absence of passions in God, have understood a God who became man and was defeated, and was even to reassume his body subsequently to live as the Risen One? "We will hear you again about this" (Acts 17: 32) the

Athenians said scornfully to Paul when they heard him talking about the resurrection of the dead. They considered liberation from the body conceived as a prison as perfection. How could they not see the resumption of the body as an aberration? In ancient culture there did not seem to be room for the message of the Incarnate God. The entire "Jesus of Nazareth" event seemed to be marked by foolishness through and through and the Cross was certainly its most emblematic point.

But why did St Paul make precisely this, the word of the Cross, the fundamental core of his teaching? The answer is not difficult: the Cross reveals "the power of God" (cf. 1 Cor 1: 24), which is different from human power; indeed, it reveals his love: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (*ibid.*, v. 25). Centuries after Paul we see that in history it was the Cross that triumphed and not the wisdom that opposed it. The Crucified One is wisdom, for he truly shows who God is, that is, a force of love which went even as far as the Cross to save men and women. God uses ways and means that seem to us at first sight to be merely weakness. The Crucified One reveals on the one hand man's frailty and on the other, the true power of God, that is the free gift of love: this totally gratuitous love is true wisdom. St Paul experienced this even in his flesh and tells us about it in various passages of his spiritual journey which have become precise reference points for every disciple of Jesus: "He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"" (2 Cor 12: 9); and again "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1: 27). The Apostle identified so closely with Christ that in spite of being in the midst of so many trials, he too lived in the faith of the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for his sins and for the sins of all (cf. Gal 1: 4; 2: 20). This autobiographical fact concerning the Apostle becomes paradigmatic for all of us.

St Paul gave a wonderful synthesis of the theology of the Cross in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (5: 14-21) where everything is enclosed between two fundamental affirmations: on the one hand Christ, whom God made to be sin for our sake (v. 21), *he died for all* (v. 14); and on the other, God *reconciled us to himself* without imputing our sins to us (vv. 18-20). It is from this "ministry of reconciliation" that every form of slavery is already redeemed (cf. 1 Cor 6: 20; 7: 23). Here it appears how important this is for our lives. We too must enter into this "ministry of reconciliation" that always implies relinquishing one's superiority and opting for the folly of love. St Paul sacrificed his own life, devoting himself without reserve to the ministry of reconciliation, of the Cross, which is salvation for us all. And we too must be able to do this: may we be able to find our strength precisely in the humility of love and our wisdom in the weakness of renunciation, entering thereby into God's power. We must all model our lives on this true wisdom: we must not live for ourselves but must live in faith in that God of whom we can all say: "he loved me and gave himself for me".

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present, especially those

from Britain and Ireland, Norway, Australia, Korea, Vietnam and the United States of America. I greet especially the Delegation of Papal Knights from Great Britain, and the members and benefactors of the Gregorian University Foundation of New York. Upon you and your families, I cordially invoke God's Blessings of peace and joy.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Yesterday the Liturgy commemorated the Holy Apostles Simon and Jude Thaddeus. May their example sustain you, dear *young people*, in your commitment of daily fidelity to Christ; may it encourage you, dear *sick people*, always to follow Jesus in the process of trial and suffering; may it help you, dear *newlyweds*, to make your family a place of constant encounter with the love of God and of the brethren.

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