ESSAYS OF DOROTHY L. SAYERS

Part I

THE GREATEST DRAMA EVER STAGED

&

THE TRIUMPH OF EASTER

THE GREATEST DRAMA EVER STAGED IS THE OFFICIAL CREED OF CHRISTENDOM

Official Christianity, of late years, has been having what is known as "a bad press." We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—"dull dogma," as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma is the drama.

That drama is summarised quite clearly in the creeds of the Church, and if we think it dull it is because we either have never really read those amazing documents, or have recited them so often and so mechanically as to have lost all sense of their meaning.

The plot pivots upon a single character, and the whole action is the answer to a single central problem: ***What think ye of Christ?***

Before we adopt any of the unofficial solutions (some of which are indeed excessively dull)—before we dismiss Christ as a myth, an idealist, a demagogue, a liar or a lunatic—it will do no harm to find out what the creeds really say about Him. What does the Church think of Christ?

The Church's answer is categorical and uncompromising, and it is this: That Jesus Bar-Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, was in fact and in truth, and in the most exact and literal sense of the words, the God "by Whom all things were made." His body and brain were those of a common man; His personality was the personality of God, so far as that personality could be expressed in human terms. He was not a kind of demon or fairy pretending to be human; He was in every respect a genuine living man. He was not merely a man so good as to be "like God"—He was God.

Now, this is not just a pious commonplace; it is not commonplace at all. For what it means is this, among other things: that for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not

exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worth while.

Christianity is, of course, not the only religion that has found the best explanation of human life in the idea of an incarnate and suffering god. The Egyptian Osiris died and rose again; Aeschylus in his play, *The Eumenides*, reconciled man to God by the theory of a suffering Zeus. But in most theologies, the god is supposed to have suffered and died in some remote and mythical period of pre-history. The Christian story, on the other hand, starts off briskly in St. Matthew's account with a place and a date: "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King."

St. Luke, still more practically and prosaically, pins the thing down by a reference to a piece of government finance. God, he says, was made man in the year when Caesar Augustus was taking a census in connection with a scheme of taxation. Similarly, we might date an event by saying that it took place in the year that Great Britain went off the gold standard. About thirty-three years later (we are informed) God was executed, for being a political nuisance, "under Pontius Pilate"—much as we might say, "when Mr. Joynson-Hicks was Home Secretary." It is as definite and concrete as all that.

Possibly we might prefer not to take this tale too seriously—there are disquieting points about it. Here we had a man of Divine character walking and talking among us—and what did we find to do with Him? The common people, indeed, "heard Him gladly"; but our leading authorities in Church and State considered that He talked too much and uttered too many disconcerting truths. So we bribed one of His friends to hand Him over quietly to the police, and we tried Him on a rather vague charge of creating a disturbance, and had Him publicly flogged and hanged on the common gallows, "thanking God we were rid of a knave." All this was not very creditable to us, even if He was (as many people thought and think) only a harmless crazy preacher.

But if the Church is right about Him, it was more discreditable still; for the man we hanged was God Almighty.

So that is the outline of the official story—the tale of the time when God was the under-dog and got beaten, when He submitted to the conditions He had laid down and became a man like the men He had made, and the men He had made broke Him and killed Him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and hero.

If this is dull, then what in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore—on the contrary; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him "meek and mild," and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

To those who knew Him, however, He in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; they objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand. True, He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a "gluttonous man and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth or social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humour that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb.

He was emphatically not a dull man in His human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had "a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly," and officialdom

felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

"And the third day He rose again"; what are we to make of that? One thing is certain: if He was God and nothing else, His immortality means nothing to us; if He was man and no more, His death is no more important than yours or mine. But if He really was both God and man, then when the man Jesus died, God died too, and when the God Jesus rose from the dead, man rose too, because they were one and the same person.

The Church binds us to no theory about the exact composition of Christ's Resurrection Body. A body of some kind there had to be, since man cannot perceive the Infinite otherwise than in terms of space and time. It may have been made from the same elements as the body that disappeared so strangely from the guarded tomb, but it was not that old, limited, mortal body, though it was recognisably like it. In any case, those who saw the risen Christ remained persuaded that life was worth living and death a triviality—an attitude curiously unlike that of the modern defeatist, who is firmly persuaded that life is a disaster and death (rather inconsistently) a major catastrophe.

Now, nobody is compelled to believe a single word of this remarkable story. God (says the Church) has created us perfectly free to disbelieve in Him as much as we choose. If we do disbelieve, then He and we must take the consequences in a world ruled by cause and effect. The Church says further, that man did, in fact, disbelieve, and that God did, in fact, take the consequences. All the same, if we are going to disbelieve a thing, it seems on the whole to be desirable that we should first find out what, exactly, we are disbelieving.

Very well, then: "The right Faith is, that we believe that Jesus Christ is God and Man. Perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Who although He be God and Man, yet is He not two, but one Christ."

There is the essential doctrine, of which the whole elaborate structure of Christian faith and morals is only the logical consequence.

Now, we may call that doctrine exhilarating or we may call it devastating; we may call it revelation or we may call it rubbish; but if we call it dull, then words have no meaning at all. That God should play the tyrant over man is a dismal story of unrelieved oppression; that man should play the tyrant over man is the usual dreary record of human futility; but that man should play the tyrant over God and find Him a better man than himself is an astonishing drama indeed. Any journalist, hearing of it for the first time, would recognise it as News; those who did hear it for the first time actually called it News, and good news at that; though we are apt to forget that the word Gospel ever meant anything so sensational.

Perhaps the drama is played out now, and Jesus is safely dead and buried. Perhaps. It is ironical and entertaining to consider that once at least in the world's history those words might have been spoken with complete conviction, and that was upon the eve of the Resurrection.

THE TRIUMPH OF EASTER

"O FELIX CULPA!" said Augustine of Hippo, rather dangerously, with reference to the sin of Adam. "O happy guilt, that did deserve such and so great a Redeemer!"

It is difficult, perhaps, to imagine a pronouncement that lays itself more open to misunderstanding. It is the kind of paradox that bishops and clergy are warned to beware of uttering from the pulpit. But, then, the Bishop of Hippo was a very remarkable bishop indeed, with a courage of his convictions rare in highly-placed ecclesiastical persons.

If spiritual pastors are to refrain from saying anything that might ever, by any possibility, be misunderstood by anybody, they will end—as in fact many of them do—by never saying anything worth hearing. Incidentally, this particular brand of timidity is the besetting sin of the good churchman. Not that the Church approves it. She knows it of old for a part of the great, sprawling, drowsy, deadly Sin of Sloth—a sin from which the preachers of fads, schisms, heresies and anti-Christ are most laudably free.

The children of this world are not only (as Christ so caustically observed) wiser in their generation than the children of light; they are also more energetic, more stimulating and bolder.

It is always, of course, more amusing to attack than to defend; but good Christian people should have learnt by now that it is best to defend by attacking, seeing that the Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. St. Augustine, anyway, seeing the perpetual problem of sin and evil being brought up and planted, like a battery, against the Christian position, sallied promptly forth, like the good strategist he was, and spiked its guns with a thanksgiving.

The problem of sin and evil is, as everybody knows, one which all religions have to face, especially those that postulate an all-good and all-powerful God. "If," we say readily, "God is holy and omnipotent, He would interfere and stop all this kind of thing"—meaning by "this kind of thing" wars, persecutions, cruelties, Hitlerism, Bolshevism, or whatever large issue happens to be distressing our minds at the time. But let us be quite sure that we have really considered the problem in all its aspects.

"Why doesn't God smite this dictator dead?" is a question a little remote from us. Why, madam, did He not strike you dumb and imbecile before you uttered that baseless and unkind slander the day before yesterday? Or me, before I behaved with such cruel lack of consideration to that well-meaning friend? And why, sir, did He not cause your hand to rot off at the wrist before you signed your name to that dirty little bit of financial trickery?

You did not quite mean that? But why not? Your misdeeds and mine are none the less repellent because our opportunities for doing damage are less spectacular than those of some other people. Do you suggest that your doings and mine are too trivial for God to bother about? That cuts both ways; for, in that case, it would make precious little difference to His creation if He wiped us both out tomorrow.

Well, perhaps that is not quite what we meant. We meant why did God create His universe on these lines at all? Why did He not make us mere puppets, incapable of executing anything but His own pattern of perfection?

Some schools of thought assert that He did, that everything we do (including Jew-baiting in Germany and our own disgusting rudeness to Aunt Eliza) is rigidly determined for us, and that, however much we may dislike the pattern, we can do nothing about it. This is one of those theories that are supposed to free us from the trammels of superstition. It certainly relieves our minds of all responsibility; unfortunately, it imposes a fresh set of trammels of its own. Also, however much we may believe in it, we seem forced to behave as though we did not.

Christians (surprising as it may appear) are not the only people who fail to act up to their creed; for what determinist philosopher, when his breakfast bacon is uneatable, will not blame the free will of the cook, like any Christian? To be sure, the philosopher's protest, like his bacon, is pre-determined also; that is the silly part of it. Our minds are the material we have to work upon when constructing philosophies, and it seems but an illogical creed, whose proof depends on our discarding all the available evidence.

The Church, at any rate, says that man's will is free, and that evil is the price we pay for knowledge, particularly the kind of knowledge which we call self-consciousness. It follows that we can, by God's grace, do something about the pattern. Moreover, God Himself, says the Church, is doing something about it—with our co-operation, if we choose, in despite of us if we refuse to co-operate—but always, steadily, working the pattern out.

And here we come up against the ultimate question which no theology, no philosophy, no theory of the universe has ever so much as attempted to answer completely. Why should God, if there is a God, create anything, at any time, of any kind at all?

That is a real mystery, and probably the only completely insoluble mystery there is. The one person who might be able to give some sort of guess at the answer is the creative artist, and he, of all people in the world, is the least inclined even to ask the question, being accustomed to take all creative activity as its own sufficient justification.

But we may all, perhaps, allow that it is easier to believe the universe to have come into existence for some reason than for no reason at all.

The Church asserts that there is a Mind which made the universe, that He made it because He is the sort of Mind that takes pleasure in creation, and that if we want to know what the Mind of the Creator is, we must look at Christ. In Him, we shall discover a Mind that loved His own creation so completely that He became part of it, suffered with and for it, and made it a sharer in His own glory and a fellow-worker with Himself in the working out of His own design for it.

That is the bold postulate that the Church asks us to accept, adding that, if we do accept it (and every theoretical scheme demands the acceptance of some postulate or other) the answers to all our other problems will be found to make sense.

Accepting the postulate, then, and looking at Christ, what do we find God "doing about" this business of sin and evil? And what is He expecting us to do about it? Here, the Church is clear enough. We find God continually at work turning evil into good. Not, as a rule, by irrelevant miracles and theatrically effective judgments—Christ was seldom very encouraging to those who demanded signs, or lightnings from Heaven, and God is too subtle and too economical a craftsman to make very much use of those methods. But He takes our sins and errors and turns them into victories, as He made the crime of the crucifixion to be the salvation of the world. "O felix culpa!" exclaimed St. Augustine, contemplating the accomplished work.

Here is the place where we are exceedingly liable to run into misunderstanding. God does not need our sin, still less does He make us sin, in order to demonstrate His power and glory. His is not the uneasy power that has to reassure itself by demonstrations.

Nor is it desirable that we should create evils on purpose for the fun of seeing Him put them right. That is not the idea at all. Nor yet are we to imagine that evil does not matter, since God can make it all right in the long run.

Whatever the Church preaches on this point, it is not a facile optimism. And it is not the advisability of doing evil that good may come. Over-simplification of this sort is as misleading as too much complication and just as perilously attractive. It is, for instance, startling and illuminating to hear a surgeon say casually,

when congratulated upon some miracle of healing, "Of course, we couldn't have done that operation without the experience we gained in the War."

There is a good result of evil; but, even if the number of sufferers healed were to exceed that of all the victims who suffered in the War, does that allay the pangs of the victims or of any one of them, or excuse the guilt that makes war possible? No, says the Church, it does not.

If an artist discovers that the experience gained through his worst sins enables him to produce his best work, does that entitle him to live like a beast for the sake of his art? No, says the Church, it does not. We can behave as badly as we like, but we cannot escape the consequences. "Take what you will, said God" (according to the Spanish proverb) "take it and pay for it." Or somebody else may do the paying and pay fully, willingly and magnificently, but the debt is still ours. "The Son of man goeth as it is written of Him; but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born."

When Judas sinned, Jesus paid; He brought good out of evil, He led out triumph from the gates of hell and brought all mankind out with Him; but the suffering of Jesus and the sin of Judas remain a reality. God did not abolish the fact of evil: He transformed it. He did not stop the crucifixion: He rose from the dead.

"Then Judas, which had betrayed Him, when he saw that He was condemned,... cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself." And thereby Judas committed the final, the fatal, the most pitiful error of all; for he despaired of God and himself and never waited to see the Resurrection. Had he done so, there would have been an encounter, and an opportunity, to leave invention bankrupt; but unhappily for himself, he did not. In this world, at any rate, he never saw the triumph of Christ fulfilled upon him, and through him, and despite of him. He saw the dreadful payment made, and never knew what victory had been purchased with the price.

All of us, perhaps, are too ready, when our behaviour turns out to have appalling consequences, to rush out and hang ourselves.

Sometimes we do worse, and show an inclination to go and hang other people. Judas, at least, seems to have blamed nobody but himself, and St. Peter, who had a minor betrayal of his own to weep for, made his act of contrition and waited to see what came next. What came next for St. Peter and the other disciples was the sudden assurance of what God was, and with it the answer to all the riddles.

If Christ could take evil and suffering and do that sort of thing with them, then of course it was all worth while, and the triumph of Easter linked up with that strange, triumphant prayer in the Upper Room, which the events of Good Friday had seemed to make so puzzling. As for their own parts in the drama, nothing could now alter the fact that they had been stupid, cowardly, faithless, and in many ways singularly unhelpful; but they did not allow any morbid and egotistical remorse to inhibit their joyful activities in the future.

Now, indeed, they could go out and "do something" about the problem of sin and suffering. They had seen the strong hands of God twist the crown of thorns into a crown of glory, and in hands as strong as that they knew themselves safe. They had misunderstood practically everything Christ had ever said to them, but no matter: the thing made sense at last, and the meaning was far beyond anything they had dreamed. They had expected a walk-over, and they beheld a victory; they had expected an earthly Messiah, and they beheld the Soul of Eternity.

It had been said to them of old time, "No man shall look upon My face and live"; but for them a means had been found. They had seen the face of the living God turned upon them; and it was the face of a suffering and rejoicing Man.

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