

The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 17: He Who Is the Christ

And Jesus went out, and his disciples, into the towns of Caesarea Philip pi: and by the way he asked his disciples, saying unto them, Whom do men say that I am? And they answered, John the Baptist: but some say, Elias; and others, One of the prophets. And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him. And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter saying, Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men. Mark 8:27-33.

This story is the centre of Marks Gospel. And in this story we find the heart of the Christian message. The message is infinitely simple, yet rich and profound, and concentrated in four words: "Thou art the Christ." Let us think about this message in the light of our story, which is the real beginning of the Passion and Death.

Then Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea and Philippi, on a road between some unimportant villages, at a time which seems indefinite -- then. But on this road occurred the most important event of human history. It is the most important not only from the point of view of the believer, but also from that of the detached observer of world history. And this indefinite "then" pointed to the most definite and decisive moment in the experience of mankind, the moment in which one man dared to say to another: "Thou art the Christ."

On the road, He inquired of His disciples, "Who do people say I am?" "John the Baptist", they told him, "although some say that you are Elijah, and others, that you are one of the prophets." Why did they give Him titles that elevated Him above the ordinary human being? It was because they expected something extraordinary: the coming of the new world order in the near future. All generations of mankind had waited in vain for this new stage of the world, in which justice and peace would reign. The people believed that their generation would witness its coming. But before it would come, forerunners would have to appear, to announce its coming and to prepare the people. Elijah would come from heaven, to which he had been

elevated; perhaps Jeremiah would rise from the dead; or some other prophet would appear; even John the Baptist might return from his grave. They felt that behind the figure of this teaching and healing Rabbi some mysterious thing was hidden. They thought that He must be the mask for one of the forerunners, who would come to prepare the new and final period of history. That is what the disciples heard from the people.

Although there have been two thousand years of Christianity, there are still such people. Jesus, for them, remains the forerunner. The new world and he who is to bring it in are still to come. Justice and peace have not yet begun to rule. The new world may be near at hand, or it may be still far from us. In any case, it has not appeared. That is the characteristic feeling of the Jewish people, the feeling that prevents them from becoming Christian. It is also the feeling of large groups within present-day Christendom, the feeling that drives them to wait and to work for the world of peace and justice, although they are constantly disappointed, and constantly have to start over again. If Jesus should ask us today, "Who do people say that I am?" we should have to answer exactly as His first disciples did: that He was one of the forerunners, and although perhaps the greatest of them all, probably not the last one; a forerunner and a prophet, but not he who will fulfill all things. The reign of justice and peace, the new world, has not yet come.

And so He inquired of them, "Whom do *you* say that I am?" That is the question which is put before every Christian at every time. It is the question which is put before the Church as a whole, because the Church is built upon the answer to this question, the reply of Peter: "Thou art the Christ." Peter did not simply add another, and more lofty, name to the names given by the people. Peter said, "Thou art the Christ." In these words he expressed something which was entirely different from what the people had said. He denied that Jesus was a forerunner; he denied that somebody else should be expected. He asserted that the decisive thing of history had appeared, and that the Christ, the bearer of the new, had come in this man Jesus, Who was walking with him along a dusty village road north of Palestine.

Can we still feel the meaning of Peter's statement? It is hard for us, because the word "Christ" has become the second name for Jesus. But when Peter called Jesus the Christ, the word "Christ" was still a vocational title. It designated Him, Who was to bring the liberation of Israel, the victory of God over the nations, the transformation of the human heart, and the establishment of the Messianic reign of peace and justice. Through the Christ history would be fulfilled. God would again become the Lord of mankind; and the earth would be changed into a place of blessedness. All this was implied in Peter's words, "Thou art the Christ."

The greatness and tragedy of the moment in which Peter uttered these words are visible in the reaction of Jesus: He forbade them to tell anyone about Him. The Messianic character of Jesus was a mystery. It did not mean to Him what it meant to the people. If they had heard Him call Himself the Christ, they would have expected either a great political leader or a divine figure coming from heaven. He did not believe that a political action, the liberation of Israel and the crushing of the Empire, could create a new reality on earth. And He could not call Himself the heavenly Christ without seeming blasphemous to those who, by necessity, misunderstood Him. For Christ is neither the political "king of peace" whom the nations of all history expected, and whom we expect today just as ardently; nor is He the heavenly "king of glory" whom the many visionaries of His day expected, and whom we also expect today. His mystery is more profound; it cannot be expressed through the traditional names. It can only be revealed by the events which were to come after Peter's confession: the suffering, death, and rising again. Perhaps if He should appear today, He would forbid the ministers of the Christian Church to speak of Him for a long time. "He forbade them to tell anyone about Him." Our churches speak of Him day after day, Sunday after Sunday, some more in terms of the political king of peace, some more in terms of the heavenly king of glory. They call Him Jesus Christ, forgetting, and making us forget, what it means to say: Jesus is the Christ. The most incredible and humanly impossible event -- a wandering Jewish Rabbi is the Christ -- has become natural to us. Let us at least sometimes remind ourselves and our people that *Jesus Christ* means *Jesus Who is said to be the Christ*. Let us ask ourselves and others from time to time whether we can seriously agree with Peter's ecstatic exclamation, whether we are likewise overwhelmed by the mystery of this Man. And if we cannot answer

affirmatively should we not at least be silent, in order to preserve the mystery of the words, instead of destroying their meaning by our common talk?

And He proceeded to teach them that the Son of Man must endure much suffering, must be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, must be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke of this quite freely. The moment in which Peter called Him the Christ, Jesus prophesied His suffering and death. He began to reveal the mystery of His Messianic destiny. It was contrary to everything that the people expected, that the visionaries dreamt, and that the disciples hoped for. He was to be rejected by the political authorities of the nation, whose king the Christ was supposed to be. He was to be rejected by the religious authorities of a selected people, whose leader the Christ was supposed to become. He was to be rejected by the cultural authorities of that tradition which was supposed to overcome all pagan tradition through the Christ. *He* was to suffer -- He Who was expected to transform all suffering into blessedness. *He* was to die -- He Who was supposed to appear in divine glory. Jesus did not deny His Messianic vocation. In the symbolic words concerning the "rising after three days", He indicated that His rejection and His death would not be a defeat, but rather the necessary steps to His becoming the Christ. He was to be the Christ only as a suffering and dying Christ. Only as such *is* He the Christ, or, as He called Himself more mysteriously, the Son of Man.

Peter took Him and began to reprove Him for His words. But Jesus turned to him, and looking at His disciples, rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind me, you Satan. Your outlook is not God's, but man's." Nobody in Jesus' time would have doubted the fact that God sent suffering and martyrdom even to the righteous. The Old Testament proved that on every page. Therefore, it was not that fact which has made the history of the Passion the most important part of the whole Gospel. It was not the value of suffering and the value of an heroic death, which have given the power to the picture of the Crucified. There have been many pictures of creative suffering and of heroic death in human history. But none of them can be compared with the picture of Jesus' death. Something unique happened in His suffering and death. It was, and is, a divine mystery, humanly unintelligible, divinely necessary. Therefore, when Peter, shocked and overwhelmed by sorrow and love, tried to prevent Him from going to Jerusalem, Jesus considered his pleading a satanic temptation. It would have destroyed His Messianic character. As the Christ, He would have to suffer and die. The real Christ was not the Christ in power and glory.

The Christ had to suffer and die, because whenever the Divine appears in all Its depth, it cannot be endured by men. It must be pushed away by the political powers, the religious authorities, and the bearers of cultural tradition. In the picture of the Crucified, we look at the rejection of the Divine by humanity. We see that, in this rejection, not the lowest, but the highest representatives of mankind are judged. Whenever the Divine appears, it is a radical attack on everything that is good in man, and therefore man must repel it, must push it away, must crucify it. Whenever the Divine manifests Itself as the new reality, it must be rejected by the representatives of the old reality. For the Divine does not complete the human; it revolts against the human. Because of that, the human must defend itself against it, must reject it, and must try to destroy it.

Yet when the Divine is rejected, it takes the rejection upon Itself. it accepts our crucifixion, our pushing away, the defense of ourselves against it. It accepts our refusal to accept, and thus conquers us. That is the centre of the mystery of the Christ. Let us try to imagine a Christ Who would not die, and Who would come in glory to impose upon us His power, His wisdom, His morality, and His piety. He would be able to break our resistance by His strength, by His wonderful government, by His infallible wisdom, and by His irresistible perfection. But He would not be able to win our hearts. He would bring a new law, and would impose it upon us by His all-powerful and all-perfect Personality. His power would break our freedom; His glory would overwhelm us like a burning, blinding sun; our very humanity would be swallowed in His Divinity. One of Luther's most profound insights was that God made Himself small for us in Christ. In so doing, He left us our freedom and our humanity. He showed us His Heart, so that our hearts could be won.

When we look at the misery of our world, its evil and its sin, especially in these days which seem to mark the

end of a world period, we long for divine interference, so that the world and its daemonic rulers might be overcome. We long for a king of peace within history, or for a king of glory above history. We long for a Christ of power. Yet if *He* were to come and transform us and our world, we should have to pay the *one* price which we could not pay: we would have to lose our freedom, our humanity, and our spiritual dignity. Perhaps we should be happier; but we should also be lower beings, our present misery, struggle, and despair notwithstanding. We should be more like blessed animals than men made in the image of God. Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified, have no knowledge of the mystery of God and of man.

They are the ones who must consider Jesus as merely a forerunner. They are the ones who must expect others with a greater power to transform the world, others with a greater wisdom to change our hearts. But even the greatest in power and wisdom could not more fully reveal the Heart of God and the heart of man than the Crucified has done already. Those things have been revealed once for all. "It is finished." In the face of the Crucified all the "more" and all the "less", all progress and all approximation, are meaningless. Therefore, we can say of Him alone: He is the new reality; He is the end; He is the Messiah. To the Crucified alone we can say: "Thou art the Christ."

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