

THE CROSS WE BEAR
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At night across the valley, I see angling up the hillside from San Demetrio ne Vestini the illuminated halts of a Stations of the Cross. These should number fourteen, but from my vantage point a couple of miles away in Sant Eusanio Forconese I am able to make out only ten. Night after night I recount them. Always ten. I have never troubled to resolve the numerical discrepancy.

This past year, in the course of long stays in central Italy, I find that something of my everyday surroundings has begun to creep into the way I express myself. This state of affairs I attribute to the sheer number of medieval churches, chapels, monasteries, and hermitages constantly before my eyes, to the myriad towns in these parts named for saints, and, of course, to the recurrent winking across the hills after dark of those incomplete Stations of the Cross. Overexposure, in short, to the trappings of the Church.

I am not — I have never been — either a Roman Catholic or a Christian. My Italian roots lie in the rich soil of socialist and atheistic heresy; the terms and language I have currently been employing in the Abruzzi would never enter my speech at home in England. But recently, forced to run the byzantine gauntlet of Italian bureaucracy — endless paperwork and multiple visits to a notary, a motor vehicles registry office, a police headquarters, various post offices, and a town hall, not to mention fees

at each step for this or that petty tax, plus this or that even pettier tax on the tax — in order to acquire title to a used car that a friend was giving me as a gift, I began to speak of the ordeal in terms of being nailed to a cross. In my palms I even came close to seeing where the great iron nails of the State had torn my flesh. This sublimely trivial test of mine, which I eventually came through, had dragged on for ten months.

I have spoken of my Italian roots. I have old and honourable New England roots as well. My early years were lived not twenty miles from Walden Pond, whose most famous denizen, Henry David Thoreau, I have long admired. At the same time, we lived only a stone's throw from the site of Brook Farm, the 1840s communist experiment made famous in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*; we were also close to —and frequented — a circle of Italian anarchists, nearly all of whom earned their living in the building trades. These last, who quoted Dante and read Max Stirner and knew a good deal about Thoreau, greatly influenced the way I view the world and the way I have lived my life. It was perhaps inevitable that the first piece of any consequence I ever published was about the highly-principled Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

So much for my spiritual bloodline. It tells where I come from, who I am, and it should also make clear the angle from which I am approaching this sally of mine into gospel lands.

Associative leaps. Italy. My ten months of torment; the ten visible Stations of the Cross before my nightly eyes. As images of those representations of the Via Crucis

came to mind I found I could not recall mention in the Gospels of the three highly cinematic points at which Jesus stumbles under the weight of the cross. Where did they — and, for that matter, the appearance of Jesus mother and Veronica and her handkerchief — come from? I began to reflect on the career of Jesus, especially on that part of it concerning the story of the Passion.

Accounts of the cross being toted or drawn by Jesus on the famous journey from Gabbatha to Golgotha leave me sceptical and unconvinced. My reasoning runs along two paths — first, the physical, that which is subject to the laws of nature and which in my case is embedded in the experiences of my off-and-on navying days; and second, the ideological, that which concerns ideas, especially ideas of social justice.

The physical. How long was the route? How heavy the cross? What were its dimensions? How was it made, and how did it work? Direct historical evidence in these matters being scant, recent commentators have strained to come up with satisfying theories. One scholar gives the whole distance of the death march as 650 yards; another, for that part of the way along which at least a portion of the instrument of crucifixion was borne, the less precise length of over two football fields . By the archeological proofs, these figures are reasonably accurate, although from my own poring over maps of Jerusalem I find that the former may be too long and the latter too short. But what exactly was carried?

The consensus nowadays seems to contradict centuries of Christian art, favouring not an entire cross but only the horizontal piece, or *patibulum*, which would have

been lashed to Jesus' shoulders. This notion is compelling. I calculate that such a *patibulum* would have measured some four or five feet in length, and I have seen figures for its weight estimated, variously, at 100 and 110 pounds. The upright, or *stipes*, of a complete cross — to judge by the proportions one sees in medieval and Renaissance depictions — averages two to two-and-a-half times Jesus' stature. To this we must add another good third or more that lies unseen below ground. A full cross, then, would have measured at least fifteen feet in length, with its other dimensions a minimum 6x4 inches. The weight of such joinery, with the *patibulum*, would have totalled an impossible 400 or more pounds.

Three of the four Gospels seem to acknowledge this insuperable difficulty. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that someone else — Simon, a Cyrene, a passer-by coming out of the country — was compelled to bear Jesus' cross. When we consider Jesus' undoubted exhaustion after a sleepless night, the various buffetings meted out to him, and the flogging, Simon's necessary assistance is not to be wondered at. John, in his stripped-down account, ignores Simon. As he tells the story, it was Jesus who shouldered the cross. (And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called ... Golgotha). John's version must be discounted.

While the *patibulum* alone thesis is more realistic — and therefore more credible — it nonetheless gives rise to further points of puzzlement. Those who subscribe to this more streamlined version of the crucifixion speculate that the crossbar would have been carried to an already planted upright. In this scenario, thrown to the ground, Jesus is

spiked (through the wrists, not the hands) to the transverse bar. With him attached to it, the bar is then raised to the top of the *stipes*. Jesus' feet are then nailed to the upright.

But how *patibulum* and *stipes* were secured together we are not told. I cannot follow the mechanics of this. A full cross would have been a precisely carpentered affair, with its two pieces most likely cross-lap-joined for strength and stability. But how could these pieces have been so fixed with Jesus nailed to one of them? Whether a tau or a Latin cross were used, it would have required a colossal effort on the part of two or more soldiers to have lifted him and the heavy bar in place while someone else would have had to bend Jesus' head and neck to one side while yet another party fastened the two timbers together, presumably by hammering in nails. Utterly impossible. The procedure can only have been, as shown in countless paintings, that of a whole cross with Jesus nailed hand and foot to it hoisted by soldiers pushing and lifting from one side while others pulled and tugged from the other using ropes attached to the ends of the *patibulum*.

Both nails and sophisticated joinery, however, are problematic. The victims of most crucifixions were more likely to have been hung by roped wrists from a tree with roughly lopped branches. This, the fate of the two thieves alongside Jesus, is clearly illustrated by Antonello da Messina in at least two of his paintings. But for a lurid exploitation of Jesus' agony, a smooth Latin or tau cross and great iron nails a good five to seven inches long make for more violent suffering; in turn, violent suffering enhances the sheer pathos and, ultimately, makes for greater impact.

So too the codified fourteen stations, invented by the Franciscans in the middle of the eighteenth century. These weave in details not set out in the Gospels. What could be more poignant, gripping, or sentimental — more Hollywood — than those moments in which Jesus falls under the weight of the cross (iii, vii, ix), is met by his mother (iv), and has his face wiped by Veronica (vi)? All these, in terms of narrative, of spectacle, make a good story even better.

The aim of recent apologists, who have reduced a full cross to a more manageable part of it, seems to be that of enhancing the credibility of the crucifixion at the expense of drama and colour. If such is the case, why have they not stretched themselves one step further and presented us with the simplest and most plausible of all solutions — a whole cross, lying on the stony ground of Golgotha next to a deeply dug hole, a hammer, and a handful of great nails, all awaiting Jesus arrival? This view, after all — although it runs contrary to Franciscan embellishments — is not so far from that of the three Gospels strapping Cyrene, the country boy who was plucked out of the crowd to save the day.

But neither does this scenario satisfy me.

The ideological. Let us put aside lame piety, the insipid meek-and-mild Nazarene of the Victorians, the epic Cecil B. De Mille. Jesus was a threat to the established order — a troublemaker, a lawbreaker, a rebel, a revolutionary. All four Gospels make this plain. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth, he announces in a manifesto to his twelve followers; I came not to send peace, but a sword.

A well-known attribute of the rebel on trial is to deny or to undermine or simply to ignore the authority of his judges. We see the hint of just such a programme in the counsel Jesus gave his disciples as he prepared them for the tribulations that lay ahead. I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves, he warned; be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves. This last was the precise style he was soon to adopt for himself.

In Matthew, the tactic begins to unfold during Jesus' audience in the high priest's palace, when a parade of witnesses make statements against him. Jesus is unruffled. Answerest thou nothing? pursues the exasperated Caiaphas. Refusing to be drawn in, Jesus holds his peace.

Shortly after, in Jesus' next clash with the authorities, Pilate asks him if he is King of the Jews. Thou sayest, replies the harmless dove. Again, a moment later, he curbs himself from answering the charges against him. Pilate presses in disbelief: Hearest thou not how many things they witness against thee? And he answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly.

Mark too records the same pattern of wise-serpent-harmless-dove maneuvering. The high priest questioned, and Jesus held his peace, and answered nothing. Before Pilate, ditto. Dumbfounded, the governor continues probing: Answerest thou nothing? And the dove yet answered nothing.

In Luke, we find that Pilate wants to be rid of this hot potato, this Jewish firebrand, so he dispatches Jesus to Herod. Herod fires off question after question, all to no avail. Jesus answered him nothing. In John's account,

Jesus is somewhat more forthcoming in his audience with Pilate, who is clearly intrigued by him. Still, Jesus cannot refrain from evasion, and he answers Pilate's question with one of his own. Back and forth from the judgment hall goes Pilate, pleading with the Jews for Jesus' release, then returning to Jesus, who snubs him. The governor implores: Speakest thou not unto me? knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee? Then comes the rebel's classic undermining reply: Thou couldest have no power *at all* against me, except it were given thee from above ...

Non-compliance, non-submission — the formulation laid down by Jesus for his disciples and himself — is not dumb insolence but action from principle. It is stubborn and it is unconciliatory. Call it non-violent disobedience; call it passive resistance. In essence, in terms of exercising moral distinctions and resolving conflict, the practice is one of the wisest and most efficient in all history. A government, as Thoreau pointed out, has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will.

One against many, armed only with the unassailable truth, truth based on justice and conscience — Jesus unflinching against the authority of Judaea and Rome. Gandhi against the Boers in the Transvaal and the British in India. Martin Luther King in the American South. Rosa Parks on a bus in Alabama. Men and women of conscience standing fast for what is right, no matter what the cost, is heroism of the highest order.

Yet something in the fable of Jesus and the cross remains unresolved and incomplete. This is not because

the cross, as I have tried to show, was too unwieldy but, rather, because I prefer a likelier explanation of events than what we are given in the parsimonious official accounts. There is a precise moment when Jesus comes face to face with the physical presence of the massive wooden instrument of his death and is made to receive it. In this split second, what thoughts went through his head? Would Jesus the rebel have stooped to the task in craven subservience or would he on principle have rejected it? By not complying, what had he to lose? What additional punishment could the Roman soldiers have inflicted on him? I think he refused and I see in his non-cooperation another heroic instance of his passive resistance. It is the last act but one of the wise serpent and harmless dove. His last, I believe, was to turn down the painkilling palliative of the wine mingled with myrrh.

And what of the military escort charged with forcing the cross on him? By now these men, having had enough of the unruly Nazarene and having had their fun with him, want to get on with the unpleasant business at hand. Jesus balks, but just then the soldiers spy among the onlookers a strapping lad, young and eager, freshly arrived in the city, and without further ado Simon the Cyrene is nominated cross bearer. Once more, victory to the dove.

But alas for the fate of Jesus' essential philosophy, beleaguered by two millennia of warring factions and lumbered with a gamut of quaintly literal baggage — immaculate conceptions and virgin births, miraculous cures and recoveries, multiplying fishes and loaves, water turned into wine, walking on waves, rising from the dead. And alas for the fate of his legacy, corrupted by

institutional ritualism, by unthinking piety, and by churchmen — blind guides and vipers, he called them — who outwardly appear righteous ... but within ... are full of hypocrisy and iniquity and against whom in his lifetime he had so eloquently and savagely campaigned.

Whether or not Jesus really lived and breathed and was a carpenter and died on the cross does not matter. But his views, or the views of whoever invented him, do. And these deserve more than shallow magic realism, more than twenty centuries of cheap tricks and trivial hoaxes. Such hoodwinking may have appealed to the benighted in a pre-scientific age but it is not good enough in an age of enlightenment.

Nor need what Jesus stood for be encumbered by a belief in the ineffable entity known as God. That piece of trumpery, or sophistry, or sleight of mind — call it what you will; or simply call it, if it means what is luminously good and noble, humanity — serves only to swamp and obscure the one thing that counts, the man Jesus revolutionary words and deeds.