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ON CHRISTIAN DYING

The death of Christ is not simply an event of the past. On the contrary it is, as all Christendom believes, an event which, even though in the external and superficial sense it belongs to the past, still has an eternal validity in God's sight. For it is that unique occurrence in the history of mankind for the sake of which God in his eternity has once and for all determined to keep mankind for ever enfolded in his compassion and love. But the Christian has to think of this death of Christ in such a way that he reverently and solemnly accepts its enduring validity, and by faith makes its redemptive power effective in our lives also. And in order to do this, and in order really to understand what the message of this death is meant to convey to him he must strive to gain an understanding of the nature of death in general. Of course he can learn something of the meaning of death in general precisely *from* this message of the death of Christ. But however true this may be, still, in order to have any real understanding of what it means to say 'At that point one died for all' he has to bring to bear on the question an idea of death which is as vivid and as fully developed as possible.

In what we shall be saying about death here we shall be taking it not in the strictly biological or physiological sense of the term, but rather in that sense which it bears in the context of the Christian understanding of human existence. This is not because the latter is in contradiction to the former, but rather because precisely as person endowed with freedom and with spiritual powers man is more than a biological 'case'. The purely biological aspects of death, those, roughly speaking, which fall within the field of medicine, constitute only one element in a broader and more comprehensive whole, and it is with this broader field that theology is concerned because it has to view man as a person endowed with spirit and therefore responsible, a being which has an eternal validity; for under this aspect too death comes as the supremely decisive event in man's history.

[286] The primary factor to which the Christian understanding of death directs our attention is the universality of death. This first point seems platitudinous, and simply to reiterate a fact recognised by all as a matter of natural and common experience. However there is more to it than this. The message of faith on this point is actually addressed, in the first instance to each one of us as *individuals* as a truth which expresses the ultimate significance of the existence of each one of us taken as a whole, a truth which we must accept and opt for as an act of our own personal freedom. Viewed in this light this initial point is not so self-evident. Certainly we are aware that 'one' has to die. But this is far from implying that 'I' personally have really understood that *I* have to die, that I myself am already on the way to this death, that all my life through I am advancing inexorably and undeviatingly towards this moment of my death. It is far from implying that I constantly take the recognition of this fact as my starting-point in directing the course of my life, that I never suppress it and never act as though I myself were not already a dying man. But it is this that the message of faith concerning the universality of death is intended to convey to me first and foremost as the most basic truth of my personal life. And further, if this assertion of the universality of death were based, even from the Christian point of view, merely upon the fact that at the biological and physiological level all previous experience bears it out, then indeed it might be possible to regard it as a principle which has only been valid up to the present, but which can now be abrogated. On this view it would have the same degree of validity as the statement that 'Many die of the pestilence', a statement which was indeed true formerly, but which is not so now. It might even be possible to imagine that one day medicine will actually find a way of doing away

with the 'unpleasantness' (as it has been called) of having to die on the grounds that strictly speaking biologists are unable to explain why a cell or a group of cells should not continue to survive indefinitely.

But in contrast to this the Christian assertion of the necessity of death has an absolute validity. This is because it is based not merely upon biological considerations, but on human nature as a whole. There is a factor in man, in his very nature and in the way in which he was originally fashioned, which makes it impossible for him ever to escape from or do away with the necessity of dying, that makes it absolutely certain that he will always die. Death is not merely something that is 'appropriate' to man in the sense that it is appropriate to a precious artefact not to be [287] broken because to break it would be an outrage to its very nature and the purpose for which it was designed. On the contrary man is subject to death as a necessity of his innermost nature. It is on deeper grounds than merely biological ones that human nature inherently and inexorably tends towards death as its inevitable goal.

The deepest and most ultimate reason for the connection with and orientation to death which is most intimately inherent in man, which makes him mortal and in virtue of this fact renders all men now and for ever subject to death in the truest sense, is the freedom of the spirit. It is this, ultimately speaking, that makes man mortal, and mortality in the biological sense is only the manifestation and the realisation in the concrete of this mortality, which has its origin and basis in the freedom with which man is endowed as spiritual. How then can this be the case? Freedom is not the power constantly to change one's course of action, but rather the power to decide that which is to be final and definitive in one's life, that which cannot be superseded or replaced, the power to bring into being from one's own resources that which must be, and must not pass away, the summons to a decision that is irrevocable. If freedom were capable of achieving only that which could subsequently be abolished by a further free decision, then freedom would be nothing more than power over that which is purely neutral and indecisive, that which is always open to subsequent revision, a miserable sort of freedom, condemned, as it were, to proceed in futile circles without any final resting place, ultimately meaningless. If, therefore, man *is* personal freedom, then it follows that he is one who uses the resources of his own innermost nature to form himself by his own free act, for by the exercise of this freedom of his he can definitively determine the shape of his life as a whole, and decide what his ultimate end is to be, the ultimate realisation of his own nature, beyond all possibility of revision.

Now the physical side of man's nature, in which he actively works out the shape of his life as person and brings it to its consummation, is so constituted that it sets him in the dimension of that which is constantly open to further development. It follows from this that while it can be the dimension in which freedom is exercised *in fieri*, it cannot be that in which the fulness of freedom is achieved, the dimension of that consummation to which freedom finally and definitively attains. Freedom enters into the dimension of becoming and of openness to further development only in order to achieve its own consummation. To this extent it is exercised at [288] this physical level of man's being only in order to pass beyond it and transcend it, and so to attain to its definitive goal. The free man is willing to accept the limitations of mortality only in order that the exercise of his freedom on this plane may enable him to attain to that true immortality which lies beyond, and which consists not in an unending evolution in time but in the achieved finality of eternity itself – in that, therefore, which is beyond time.

At its deepest level the exercise of free decision bears upon death itself. It must do so because, in order to arrive at its own final perfection it must will death as that which puts an end to the mere prolongation of temporal existence. It is only on the surface of our awareness that we shrink from death. At its deepest level this awareness of ours craves for that which is imperfect and incomplete in us to be brought to an end in order that it may be finally

perfected. Indeed if anyone told us that our present state would last for ever we would regard this in itself as tantamount to being damned, for it would mean that every fleeting and transitory moment of our existence was *ipso facto* deprived of its true value, a value which consists in the fact that each of these moments provides us with the possibility of making a decision of final and permanent validity. For the outcome of the free act is always something which endures.

Of course Christianity recognises a special kind of perfection to be attained through the exercise of freedom, one that goes beyond that which death brings, namely that state of perfection in grace which the first man was offered the possibility of attaining to in Paradise. In this situation of primæval blessedness too man would not simply have enjoyed an indefinite prolongation of his earthly life; here too his freedom would have defined some state of final perfection which would have been achieved by some radical transformation of the physical side of his human nature as realised in the concrete. But in Paradise the physical side of the man who had attained to the state of Paradisal perfection would have undergone an extremely radical change. It would have been raised to a state of glorification in which it was no longer subject to constant change and flux, unfolding itself in an unending series of transformations. At the same time, however, primordial man would not have relinquished the physical side of his nature as we have to relinquish it now in order to achieve our own perfection. To that extent this necessity of death to which we are subject is a sign of the guilt in Adam of the whole race, a manifestation of the sinfulness of all. But even this does not derogate from the fact that [289] death precisely *as* that which perfects us and raises us above the continuous flow of time, as the incursion of that finality which is posited once and for all in freedom, is on a higher level than the mere process of becoming which we now call life. The one death which comes to all is natural and in harmony with our natures inasmuch as it is the birth of that finality aimed at in freedom which is the ultimate object of man's will at its most basic and fundamental. Death is 'unnatural' in its immediate effect upon the physical side, which is an essential part of man's nature, inasmuch as in death this cannot at once be transformed and raised in glory to that state of final perfection for which man's life, taken as a single and continuous whole, is designed. Instead at first this physical side of our nature simply falls away from us as something which we have to transcend and get beyond, and is relinquished as though it were of no permanent significance.

Thus from our consideration of the universality of death, inasmuch as this is an article of faith, we have been brought spontaneously and inevitably face to face with quite different and far deeper factors which are essentially inherent in death. Death is the breaking in of finality upon mere transience – that finality which is the concretisation of freedom come to its maturity. But when we make this assertion we intend it as the Christian answer both to the materialist teaching that at death man ceases totally to exist, and to the teaching of the transmigration of souls, which implicitly denies the unique and final value of this earthly life and its importance as providing the opportunity for absolute decision (in reality this latter doctrine recognises only the miserable fate of being condemned to the eternal cycle of birth and death). But while all this is true as far as it goes, a further point must straight away be added to it: this act of freedom which ultimately determines what man's final state is to be comes to its fulness, as we have seen, in death. For that very reason it constitutes the absolute climax of the process of enfeeblement and deprivation of power in man.

The freedom which is exercised on the physical plane is, in fact, that freedom by which man lays himself open to intervention from without, submits to control by another power or powers. The physical side of man's nature constitutes the sphere in which the interplay takes place of action from within himself and passion as imposed from without. As a physical being endowed with freedom man has to take cognisance of the fact that he occupies an intermediary position. He is neither wholly self-directing nor wholly subject to control by

another, but half-way between these [290] two. The mysterious interplay between action and passion in the exercise of human freedom appears above all in the fact that it is precisely at the very point at which man freely achieves his own perfection that he is, at the same time, most wholly subject to control by another. The ultimate act of freedom, in which he decides his own fate totally and irrevocably, is the act in which he either *willingly accepts or definitively rebels against* his own utter impotence, in which he is utterly subject to the control of a mystery which cannot be expressed – that mystery which we call God. In death man is totally withdrawn from himself. Every power, down to the last vestige of a possibility, of autonomously controlling his own destiny is taken away from him. Thus the exercise of his freedom taken as a whole is summed up at this point in one single decision: whether he yields everything up or whether everything is taken from him by force, whether he responds to this radical deprivation of all power by uttering his assent in faith and hope to the nameless mystery which we call God, or whether even at this point he seeks to cling on to his own autonomy, protests against this fall into helplessness, and, because of his disbelief, supposes that he is falling into the abyss of nothingness when in reality he is falling into the unfathomable depths of God.

On the basis of this it is possible for us to realise that death can be either an act of faith or a mortal sin. In order rightly to understand this we must consider (and perhaps it would have been clearer to make this point right from the first) that the actual act of dying does not necessarily occur at that point in time in the physical order at which doctors suppose it to take place, and at which it is considered to take place in the popular estimation when men speak of the final departure and of death as coming at the end of life. In reality we *are* dying all our lives through right up to this, the final point in the process of dying. Every moment of life is a stage on the way to this final goal, a stage which already carries this end within itself and derives its significance from it, just as when one sees a shot fired one can already estimate, even as it is travelling, where the impact will fall. Life, therefore, is in a true sense a process of dying, and what we are accustomed to call death is the final point in this life-long process. Dying takes place throughout life itself and death when it comes is only the ultimate and definitive completion of the process. Now this death in life or living death, as it may be called, can become one of two things: it can be made into an enduring act of faith in the fact that our lives and destinies are being directed and controlled by another and that this [291] direction is right; the willing acceptance of our destiny, the ultimate act of self-commitment to that destiny, a renunciation which we make in anticipation of our final end because in the end we must renounce all things; also because we believe that it is only by this poverty entailed in freely accepting our own destiny that we can free ourselves for the hand of God in his unfathomable power and grace to dispose of us as he wills. *Alternatively* this death in the midst of life can become an act of desperately clinging on by main force to that which is destined to fall away from us, a protest, whether silent or expressed, against this death in life, the despair of one who is avid for life and who imagines that he has to sin and so to obtain his happiness by force. The death that is accomplished in life, therefore, must be really the act of that loving and therefore trustful faith which gives man courage to allow himself to be taken up by another. Otherwise it will become the mortal sin which consists in the pride of seeking one's own absolute autonomy, anxiety (*Angst*) and despair all in one.

Now in both modes of dying there are, whether we realise it or not, others who have gone before us. We are not the first to die, but are rather the successors of these, caught up in a struggle between life and death which takes place on a more comprehensive scale. Certainly each individual dies his 'own death'. Certainly each individual is unique in the inexorable solitude of his own death because each individual life, despite the opposite impression of a meaningless existence *en masse*, in which many – all too many – are involved, is unique and unrepeatable in its free moral decision. But even though this death is personal and unique to

the individual in this sense, still it is the death which has been ushered into this world of the embodied spirit (a death, therefore, which only the superficial will equate with the death of animals) by the rebellion of the first man. And at the same time it is the death which the Son of Man freely takes upon himself. Our death is modelled upon the death of both of these. For it was precisely the death of Adam that the Son of Man willed to die in order to redeem this death. And because it is never possible for us to say of ourselves with complete certainty which exercise of life we commit ourselves to with the ultimate decision of our free will, we cannot ultimately know either whether it is possible for us to say which of the two deaths we are dying, the death of perdition or the death of Adam which has been redeemed; in other words whether the death of Christ imports life for us or judgment, whether it is the death of despair that we are dying or the [292] death of faith. Both modes of dying are *concealed beneath the surface* in the everyday process of dying.

Death affects every aspect of our personal lives and being. It constitutes the transition between the sort of being that is becoming and the sort of being that is final completion, from the freedom which has been given up to the achieved finality which is at the same time the moment of radical enfeeblement. To the extent that we regard ourselves from the point of view of this world, to the extent that we are those who are quitting it and not those who are coming into it, to this extent we are, so to say, losing possession of ourselves. And for all these reasons we have no clear vision of what this definitive and final state of death will mean for us. In dying we strive to attain to the inconceivable. It is not immediately clear in the here and now what the fruit of life which we are bringing to maturity will one day be worth. But it is precisely because death is concealed from us in this sense that it is (to reiterate) the situation *par excellence* in which we can make the most radical and absolute option possible between faith and despair, between the death of Christ and the death of Adam. The dying man passes into a state of silence and solitude which engulfs everything in its own stillness. It is a state to which he has been drawing ever closer throughout his life, the situation in which he is faced with a question, an option to be taken, in which a decision is demanded of him, the situation either of the faith that redeems or of the despair that kills. The fact that death is concealed from us in this way makes it possible for us to choose either of these alternatives.

We have spoken much about death and yet said little. For who can say much about the mysteries of human existence, especially if they are followed through to the mysteries of God himself, whose eternal Word has taken our death upon him and thereby imparted to death a divine value, a divine mystery and an eternal grace? And yet we must think about death, not merely because our life is that mode of existence which of its very nature leads to death, but still more because it is the mystery of Christ the Lord in his Good Friday. Since Christ has died for the salvation of the world, since the life of God and his glory has definitively entered into the world there has been no more decisive factor in the world than precisely this death. By comparison with this every other event in the world is transitory and ultimately unimportant, or important only in virtue of the fact that it precisely does have some part to play in this history of the death of Christ.

[293] If we have been given the vocation and the grace to die with Christ in this death of his, then the everyday and banal occurrence which we call human death, and which awaits each one of us also, has been elevated to a place among God's mysteries. In order to understand these mysteries and to be able to put them into practice in the liturgy of our life we need only to look to the death of the crucified Lord, and hear the words which he spoke, and which express what is most terrible and at the same time what is most sublime in his death. These are words which we too can hear and repeat in life and death: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Father into your hands I commend my spirit. For if we understand death as supremely *the* state of abandonment by God in which we fall into the

hands of the eternal God, then we have already understood and endured death itself.

But together with this one crucified Lord – and the implications of this symbolism are frightening – there are two other dying figures, two men who cursed their fate of death because they did not understand it. Who indeed can understand it? But one of the two looked to the death of Christ. And what he saw there was enough to enable him to understand his own death also. For when one says to the dying Christ 'Think of me when you come into your kingdom' then one has indeed understood death, understood it rightly and received it as one's own salvation. And the Son of Man, he who shared in our fate of death, redeemed it and made it a gateway to life, said to this dying man: 'Today you will be with me in Paradise.'

But he says this to us also. If we have ears for it we have already solved the baffling riddle of death. But in order that the message of the blessing which our death will bring shall not remove from us that holy fear which is so needful for us precisely to obtain this blessing in our death he says to the other thief . . . precisely nothing. The darkness and silence which hung over this death serve to warn us that death can also be the onset of a deeper death still, a death that is eternal. But even as we fear and tremble we can also listen to the joyful message, the Christian gospel of the death that is life; of the coming of the Lord who is that life which knows no death even though it comes to us in death. This reality is still veiled beneath the solemn and humbling experiences which we have to undergo in death. But the death of Good Friday, the death which issues in life and eternal goodness in God's presence – that is the truth about death which faith enables us to know.