



## The Crucified God

We tend to view the world through the lens of our own preconceptions. Some of these are about physical reality and some of them are metaphysical, about beliefs and values. To understand Jurgen Moltmann's effect on theological debate, we need to grasp how his book *The Crucified God* is profoundly offensive to a certain Christian worldview. This worldview, which he contradicts, has a number of elements. Traditionally -

1. God cannot feel or suffer – God is *impassible* or *apathetic* (NB “apathetic” has the meaning of “showing no emotion” rather than “showing no interest”). It is linked to the view that God is unchanging (immutable),
2. The Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are separated by their function not united in their feelings and experiences.
3. The question of how can God be omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient is answered in a certain way by arguing that God needs to be true to himself and so cannot change – and feeling (passibility) involves change.

Moltmann grounds his theology firmly in the cry of dereliction of the crucified God in Mark ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Mark 15:34) – a cry very different from that of John ('it is finished', John 19:30) or Luke ('Father into your hands I commit my spirit', Luke 23:46).

### The Death Cry of Christ

The Gospel of Mark finishes in a very dark place: not only is the sun extinguished in a great darkness covering the land, but the one called 'the Son of God' utters what has sometimes been called a cry of dereliction – in the loneliness and agony of crucifixion Jesus seems to ask of God the unanswerable question that is on the lips of every abandoned person:

*“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)*

We have already noted that this cry is very different from the cry emitted by the Christ of John or of Luke. The Markan cry is unmitigated by any sense of relief. As if to emphasise the point, the author of Mark has no resurrection appearances, and leaves the disciples fearful, confused and bewildered, with only a hint of a resurrected Jesus going on ahead of them into Galilee.

It is also a direct quotation from Psalm 22:1. But whereas in Psalm 22, it is Israel as a nation which is pleading with God at a time of exile and disaster, here it is the one who claimed to be God's special son, the Messiah or anointed one, the one born to be a king who is abandoned. As Moltmann points out, the meaning of this cry is essentially



different from the cry in Psalm 22 – it is radically personalised.

*“The cry of Jesus in the words of Psalm 22 means not only “My God why hast thou forsaken me?” But also “My God why hast thou forsaken thyself?” The abandonment on the cross which separates the Son from the Father is something which takes place within God himself; it is the stasis within God – ‘God against God’ – particularly if we are to maintain that Jesus bore witness to and lived out the truth of God ” (1974:151-2)*

So the cry of god-forsakenness has at its centre a paradox. God the Father and God the Son are still united but are also separated by the sentence of crucifixion. Part of the debate in theology exists in trying to understand how two (Father and Son) can be one and yet still be distinct. Moltmann argues that the Father is still suffering with the Son and with the Spirit, whereas traditional theology of the cross holds that the Christ of Golgotha descends into a place of utter desolation where there is no hint of unity preserved.

So the cross and its cry signify the profoundest abandonment and profoundest depths of despair that are possible; ‘God against God’, as Moltmann describes it. And just as ‘the resurrection of the son abandoned by God unites God with God in the most intimate fellowship’ (1974:150), so the abandonment of the Son suggests a most agonising separation.

And as Moltmann acknowledges, the death-cry of God forces us to come to terms with our own suffering – stripping away the pretence and concealment – and the sufferings of our present time and ask ‘why’ and ‘what is to be done?’

### **The theodicy of abandonment**

The characteristics of God portrayed in the Bible confront us with what has been called the inconsistent triad. How can God who claims to be all-powerful (*omnipotent*) and all-loving (*omnibenevolent*) and all-knowing and all-understanding (*omniscient*) tolerate the level of suffering in the world exhibited in violence, death, disease, poverty and starvation? How can God look on and seemingly do nothing when monstrous injustices persist?

Moltmann faced this question in his own life, for as a conscript in the German army he had to confront the reality of Auschwitz, a crime of almost unimaginable injustice and cruelty done in the name of the German people.

Moltmann’s answer is to argue that God the Father wasn’t just looking on. He was involved in the suffering himself. Part of Moltmann’s argument is to say that God allowed the suffering and gave Jesus the strength through the Spirit: ‘the Father allows the Son to sacrifice himself through the Spirit’ (1974,241 quoting Steffen). The only way to understand



the cross is through a theology of the Trinity.

Yet Moltmann pushes this idea further. He argues that the Father is not impassible or unfeeling, but unites with the Son in this moment of dereliction. As Moltmann explains in his book on the Trinity,

*“The form of the Trinity which is revealed in the giving up of the Son (i.e. the cross) appears as follows: (1) the Father gives up his own Son to death in its most absolute sense, for us; (2) the Son gives himself up, for us; (3) the common sacrifice of the Father and the Son comes about through the Holy Spirit, who joins and unites the Son in his forsakenness with the Father” (Trinity, 83)*

Moltmann’s argument is not just that this event reveals the character of God, but that the essence of God the Father is included in the event. Moltmann is emphasising the unity within the godhead and essential unity in suffering of the Trinity as the key to unlock the mystery of the Cross.

*“Humiliation to the point of death on the cross corresponds with God’s nature in the contradiction of abandonment. When the crucified Jesus is called the ‘image of the invisible God,’ the meaning is that this is God, that God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about ‘God’ is to be found in this Christ event”. (1974:205)*

It is this point about the Trinitarian nature of the Cross, whereby each part of the Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit share in the event, which many Christians find offensive. How can the unchangeable God change in this way and experience human suffering? How can the eternal Father gain a foothold in mortality? How can the God beyond feeling (*impassible*) plumb the very deepest depths of human feeling (*passability*)? In his own words Moltmann explains the apparent paradox thus: God is never more glorious than in the moment of self-surrender.

To express the idea in its most offensive form, one might say in the words of the dogma of the early church: the first person of the Trinity casts out and annihilates the second. Moltmann concludes:

*“A theology of the cross cannot be expressed more radically than it is here”. (1974:241)*

### **The Divine Relationship of Love**

“The generation and birth of the Son come from the Father’s nature, not from his will. That is why we talk about the eternal generation and birth of the Son. The Father begets and bears the Son out of the necessity of his being. Consequently the Son, like the Father, belongs to the eternal constitution of the triune God. In Christian terms, no deity



is conceivable without the eternal Father of the Son and without the eternal Son of the Father." (1974:167)

"A God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved....He is so completely insensitive [that] he cannot be affected or shaken by anything. He cannot weep, for he has no tears. But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is a loveless being. Aristotle's God cannot love....A God who is only omnipotent is in himself an incomplete being, for he cannot experience helplessness and powerlessness....A man who experiences helplessness, a man who suffers because he loves, a man who can die, is therefore a richer being than an omnipotent God who cannot suffer, cannot love, and cannot die. Therefore, for a man who is aware of the riches of his own nature in his love, his suffering, his protest and his freedom, such a God is not a necessary and supreme being, but a highly dispensable and superfluous being." (1974:222-3)

'In order to be completely itself, love has to suffer.' (Trinity, 33)

If we take the relinquishment of the Father's name in Jesus' death cry seriously, then this [the 'abandonment' of the Son in the crucifixion] is even the breakdown of the relationship that constitutes the very life of the Trinity: if the Father forsakes the Son, the Son does not merely lose his sonship. The Father loses his fatherhood as well. (Trinity, 80)

According to Moltmann, such divine fellow-suffering constitutes the only possible way to vindicate God from the charge of cruelty and console grieving humanity without at the same time justifying and thus perpetuating the injustices at the root of human grief. (Jowers, page 251)

**Hope, suffering and the human condition** (see particularly pages 267-78)

*'Christ's suffering on the cross does not consist merely in the ethical suffering of love...Jesus was also rejected by inhuman persons because of his love for those whom they had dehumanised. But this was not all: he was also, and most completely all, abandoned by his Father, whose immediate presence he proclaimed and experienced in his life. This rejection in suffering, this judgement in the cross, goes far beyond the suffering involved in the love of one's neighbour and one's enemy. But it leads beyond it not into metaphysics, but into the universal, cosmic eschatology of the end, into the abandonment by God of the godless and the destruction of all that exists...and the new creation. (1974:64)*

Suffering is part of the human condition and in a sense, the hardest part for a Christian to explain. To the atheist, suffering just is: an atheist sees no meaning or purpose in suffering. But to a Christian, suffering has a purpose.



1. God identifies with us in our suffering. If God has experienced suffering he knows what it is for human beings to suffer and can therefore comfort us.
2. It points towards the end, when the judgement of the world will come upon us – the word ‘eschatology’ in the above quote means ‘the end times’.
3. It points beyond the immediate to a higher purpose of transformation through suffering. Jesus’ cross, Moltmann reminds us should never be seen in isolation, but as the death-and-resurrection of Christ.

Moltmann also presents us with the challenge of making all this relevant to a world which appears to reject God. He writes:

*‘Christian theology must show how far the Christian confession of faith in Jesus is true as seen from the outside, and must demonstrate that it is relevant to the present-day understanding of reality and the present-day dispute about the truth of God and the righteousness of man and the world’. (1974, 84)*

Moltmann’s conclusion is a powerful one – God didn’t put humanity on like we put on a shirt, but actually became human – entering right into the human condition with all its complexity and paradox.

*“If the eternal Logos assumed a non-personal human nature, he cannot then be viewed as a historical person, and we cannot talk about ‘Jesus of Nazareth.’ The human nature that was assumed would then seem to be like the human garment of the eternal Son—something which he put on while he walked on earth. It becomes difficult to find an identity here between this human nature and our own”. Moltmann *The Way of Jesus* (1990:51)*

### References

Moltmann, J. *The Crucified God*, Harper Collins, 1974