

| THINK |

# A NEW DAY HAS DAWNED

by John Taylor



The events commemorated at Easter have always been central to Christian identity. Indeed, it can be argued that Christianity would never have existed if the early church had not been prepared to make the then difficult confession that a man who had been crucified by the Romans was both Lord and Christ.

Although Jesus' crucifixion is attested in the Gospels and in the writings of Roman and Jewish historians, to me the most persuasive argument of the historical certainty of the crucifixion is the steadfastness with which the early church continued to made the confession that the crucified Jesus was both Lord and Christ. Two thousand years of Christianity have obscured the difficulty and embarrassment which that confession caused the early church. The tension and difficulty can be seen clearly in the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the saints at Corinth. There Paul affirms that although the Jews ask for miracles and the Greeks for wisdom the church proclaims Christ nailed to the cross even though this is a stumbling block to the Jews and is folly to the Greeks.

The confession was difficult because in the world in which the first century church moved the punishment of crucifixion was regarded as a shameful and humiliating way to die. The Romans reserved it for slaves, violent criminals and the unruly elements of society. The actual practise of crucifixion was frequently accompanied by gratuitous torture of the victim and was an outlet for the sadistic impulses of both the perpetrators and the audience. To the Jews crucifixion carried connotations of human sacrifice and was often accompanied by the absence of proper burial rites.

Secondly, the confession was difficult because it conflicted so sharply with images of God which were then current. Nothing could stand in starker contrast to the macho image of God of first century Judaism (or for that matter of modern fundamentalism) or to the apathetic image of God of first century Hellenism (or for that matter to the abstract or absent image of God of modern secular humanism) than the one we see suffering and dying on a tree between two thieves. For in this image we see a God who suffers, who shows solidarity with the wretched of the earth, and who, in suffering is compassionate and forgiving. A God whose virtue is not apathy but who is passionate and, in particular, is compassionate. Indeed, this image

tempts us to say that where there is compassion there God must be.

But the Easter story does not end with the crucifixion. That is only the first half of the embarrassing confession. Their experience of the resurrection was the reality which enabled the early church to proclaim that a crucified man was Lord and Christ. There is every indication that the first disciples were more concerned with the joy which they experienced in encounter with the risen Christ than they were with largely apologetic concerns such as the mechanics of the process or whether or not the appearances were material. Generally there is an air of mystery and lack of materialism about the appearances of the risen Christ. There is thankfully only one doubting Thomas in the New Testament and here the exception may be thought to prove the rule. Most were satisfied to confess a mystery and to testify of the reality that their experience had transformed their whole conception of the universe. It may be that they really believed that the end of the world was about to happen as the consummation of history had come. The man who had seemed abandoned by God on a tree was now seen as being enthroned in power over what they considered to be the principalities and powers which governed the cosmos. His suffering was no longer merely the graphic suffering of a just and good man but was an affirmation of the worth of all those who suffer and mourn and rely on God's help. Apparently abandoned by God to a cruel and painful death at the hands of humanity he, to use a modern expression, is saved in memory by God and speaks to those who will listen.

The word he speaks is always one of forgiveness. It is always one of affirmation of the worth of all life. It is always a statement that despite the forces of egotism, powerlust, indifference, greed, insecurity and despair within us which crucify him daily we are persons of worth. He speaks to us through the faces of the oppressed and poor, the hungry and the refugees. He speaks to us when we accept the cost of discipleship, when his cross becomes our cross, when we too, through solidarity with the wretched of the earth, align ourselves with God's purposes. In this process may we experience the fellowship of the Spirit and testify with the first disciples that a new day has dawned.