

BOOK REVIEWS

What Jesus Saw from the Cross

IT IT AN INTREPID SPIRIT who would venture to look at the world through the eyes of Christ Jesus at the time of His Passion, and A.C. Sertillanges does just that in his book *What Jesus Saw from the Cross* (Sophia Institute Press, Box 5284, Manchester, NH 03108 1-800-888-9344). The author was a Dominican priest, gifted teacher, and prolific scholar. The original French version was first translated in 1948; the 1996 edition has adopted standard modern English usage and corrected some textual infelicities.

No other book known to this reviewer brings alive the religious, historical, and cultural ethos of Christianity's genesis in such "whole cloth." Baptized by a spirit of loving piety, enflamed by religious ardor, and informed by a deep but unobtrusive knowledge, Sertillanges' vision fashions a seamless garment woven of physical panorama, biography as soul portrait, and extended meditation. The style is expository, yet enamored, at times near rhapsodic. One can discern the influence of Sertillanges' Thomistic scholarship in a text that highlights the multilayered metaphysical nature of Christ's actions, teachings, and person. The following is an example:

*The Son of Man is come to adopt man,
and He takes as His own all the burdens of His
sons. His pain is not His own; it is the pain of*



Gouach, 1886-1894, J. James Tissot, Brooklyn Museum of Art

What Our Saviour Saw from the Cross

the whole world. He will overcome our pain by suffering it as by dying He will conquer death. He clings to our sorrow more closely than it embraces us, and by His compassion extracts from it all its bitterness.

The vision extends by imaginative retrospection over the entire past life of Jesus and his forebears and also projects forward to the Ascension. Poetically and poignantly all the actors in the Passiontide drama are evoked and characterized, always in the merciful beholding of Him from Whom any deceit or viciousness could but elicit fathomless forgiveness.

The reader is first introduced to the actual phys-

ical layout of Jerusalem as seen from Golgotha, from proximate to distant features. Jesus sees the Gate of Ephraim, only eighty yards distant, the Temple at a quarter of a mile, and the Mount of Olives. In viewing the hill called Zion Jesus inwardly recapitulates Israel's history and characterizes the highly contradictory nature of its people:

A people at once fearless, turbulent, restless, violent, and weak; a nation of idealists and a nation of rebels; a nation of merchants and priests, of small moneylenders and heroes; a people enslaved and kingly; creatures of routine yet pioneers of new lands; realists yet in quest of an Eden; narrow and world-wide; sordid yet protectors of the poor; mean yet superhumanly proud; prophetic yet killing the prophets; venerating their oracles yet slaying those who uttered them; faithless in the name of an inflexible faith in their destiny; many times friends to their slaughterers and slaughterers of their friends: such are the people of Israel.

Sertillanges show how Jesus is bodily the fulfillment of Old Testament longing and prophecy: "At the two extremities of that genealogical tree whose fruit is the cross there stand David and Jesus, the type and the fulfillment, the sacrifice foretold and the sacrifice accomplished. That which the joyous Psalmist announces in exultation, Christ fulfills in pain."

A chapter is devoted to the Savior's *Father's House*, the old Temple, the first of three. There follows a chapter on the *Upper Room*, the site of the Last Supper and Pentecost, where the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit of truth and resurrection first comes. Then before our mind's eye Gethsemane on the *Mount of Olives* is introduced. We are there to witness the one time in His life when Jesus asked for the help of men and did not receive it as His three chosen disciples sleep and He is identified with an infamous kiss.

We meet *Passersby*: Simon, who bears Christ's cross; Veronica, who wipes the blood and sweat from His face; the paschal celebrants, indifferent, curious, or crassly jocular. Deeply moving studies of Mary Magdalene (see the article beginning on page 46) and His Mother are presented. Then come His enemies, "in ascending order of guilt: the soldiers, the crowd, Pilate and Herod, the Jewish leaders, Judas." We enter into the inner beings of these persons no less than Jesus' friends. *His Tomb* and *Heaven* are the book's last two chapters.

In the penultimate chapter the author remarks on the "symbolic beauty of the circumstance that the tomb of Jesus was only a few paces from His Cross. Suffering and death are but two aspects of the same thing; the one lays us low, and the other completes the work of destruction. Yet through Jesus they both raise us up, and our joint ascension presents the three stages of the Cross, the tomb, and Heaven."

Let not the reader think this book is a rehash of old material. It is vital and irresistibly absorbing in its lived nowness, for it has been

QUESTIONS

As a soldier,
Wilt thou kill me?
As an employee,
Dost thou serve me?
As a farmer,
Dost thou cultivate me?
As an owner,
Dost thou possess me?
As a seeker,
Dost thou look for me?
As a juror,
Wilt thou judge me?
As a taker,
Dost thou have me?
As an actor,
Canst thou play me?
As a teacher,
Canst thou impart me?
As a lover,
Canst thou suffer me?
As a loner,
Wilt thou commune with me?
As a son of God
Wilt thou I-identify me?

—George Weaver

consecrated in the heart's reverent contemplation. While the text creates moments of sublimity, the author does not shy from the sordid and wincing details of brutality and pain.

In an era where the Gospel "stories" seem remote and even irrelevant to many, *What Jesus Saw from the Cross* bridges both this historical/cultural gulf as well the gap that often separates academic theology and the everyday experience of lay Christians. □

Carl Swan