

He gave Himself. Bethesda Meditation. 7 November 2010.

In one sense I want to build on part of a verse which David read to us last week. His reading from Titus 2 included a reference to 'our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who *gave Himself* for us to redeem us from all lawlessness'.¹

We have just sung that 'our song then for ever shall be of the Shepherd who *gave Himself* thus'.²

I have long been struck by the way, not only that the apostle Paul uses those very words '*gave Himself*' of our Lord Jesus on several occasions in his known letters, but that these letters span more or less the whole of Paul's Christian life.

In his epistle to the Galatians, he uses the expression twice – once in chapter 1 and once in chapter 2. The opening section of chapter 1 tells of 'the Lord Jesus Christ, who *gave Himself* for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age',³ and in the closing section of chapter 2 the apostle speaks of 'the Son of God, who loved me and *gave Himself* for me'.

Paul also uses the expression twice in his epistle to the Ephesians – both references being found in chapter 5, the first at the beginning, 'Christ loved us and *gave Himself* up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God',⁴ and the second towards the end, 'Christ ... loved the church, and *gave Himself* up for it; that He might sanctify it ... so that He might present the church to Himself a glorious church'.⁵

And, finally, Paul refers to our Lord's self-giving twice in what we know as 'the Pastoral Epistles' ... once in 1 Timothy 2, where Paul speaks of the 'one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who *gave Himself* as a ransom for all'⁶ ... and once, as we just noted, in Titus 2: 'our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who *gave Himself* for us to redeem us'.

But what did it mean for Him to give Himself?

With Bonfire Night behind us, and as many shops around insist on telling us, we are now in the run-up to Christmas. And we could think profitably of some of the things which our Lord Jesus gave and gave up when He came into the world.

We might think, for instance, of His heavenly glory and riches. Shortly before the Cross, He spoke longingly in prayer about the glory which He had shared with the Father *much* earlier: 'now, O Father, glorify me with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was'⁷ – with that 'glory' which the Father most jealously guarded, and which, according to Isaiah 42, He refused to share with any created being – 'I am the Lord; that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another'.⁸

It was perhaps something of that very glory which Isaiah himself saw as recorded in chapter 6 of his book, concerning which John says in his gospel, that Isaiah saw His – our Lord Jesus' – glory. Last week, we had reason to mention the seraphim of Isaiah 6, who, while crying 'Holy, holy, holy', used two of their wings to shield their faces from that glory and two of their wings to 'fly' – to hover suspended over the train of the robe worn by the One 'sitting upon a throne', whom Isaiah titles 'the King'.⁹

Oh, yes, our Lord Jesus 'gave up' that glory, that throne, that robe and that adoration.

But with bread and wine before us this morning, our thoughts go naturally – and principally – to those things which the Saviour 'gave' during His so-called Passion.

The week before last at Coffee Morning, I had occasion to quote Isaiah 50 verse 6, 'I gave my back to the smiters (to those who, with their scourges, tore His back mercilessly) and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair (when He suffered not only the disgrace but the agony of having the hair of His cheeks violently wrenched out)'. 'I hid not my face', the verse continues, 'from shame and spitting' – when we know that, biblically, to spit directly into a person's face was regarded as one of the greatest insults which could be levelled at him or her.

Oh, yes, my Lord 'gave' His back to the scourges, His cheeks to those who tore out the hair, and His face to men's filthy spittle. But not only so. He also 'gave' His head to the crown of harsh, sharp thorns which His execution squad not only wove for Him, but which they repeatedly beat down upon Him. No doubt they saw the fashioning and placing of this crown chiefly as a way of ridiculing His supposed kingly claims, but, whatever kind of thorns they used that day, these would have meant not only mockery but acute pain for Him.

And what of His hands and feet which He 'gave' to the nails? Or the side which He 'gave' to the soldier's lance?

Truly, as we shall consider later – in deed if not in word – He gave His body. As Luke reports our Lord's action in the upper room, 'He took bread, and when He had given thanks He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my

body which is given for you”¹⁰. We read that, a few days later, Joseph of Arimathea plucked up the courage to approach Pilate to ask for our Lord’s body. ‘Pilate marvelled’, we are told, ‘that He was already dead’, but, having first been assured by the centurion that our Lord had indeed died, we read that ‘he gave the body to Joseph’.¹¹ But we know that our Lord had given His body long before Pilate ever did.

And not only His body. For as the Saviour taught His disciples some time before, ‘the Son of man ... came not to be served but to serve, and to *give His life* as a ransom for many’.¹² And here, in one sense, we have come full circle. For those words ‘a ransom for many’ bring us back to David’s reading last week ... ‘who gave Himself for us to redeem us’.

All this – His back, His cheeks, His face, His hands, His feet, His side, His body, His life ... and so much more ... are bound up in Paul’s repeated statement that He ‘gave Himself’.

I say ‘repeated’ because, as we noted earlier, those words are found twice in Galatians, twice in Ephesians, and twice in the so-called Pastoral Epistles. And, as I said then, these letters span more or less the whole of Paul’s Christian life. For, in all likelihood, that to the Galatians was the first of his letters to be written – well, the first of those we still possess;¹³ with the epistle to the Ephesians following perhaps twelve years later, after the end of the period covered in the book of Acts;¹⁴ and his letters to Timothy and Titus following later again ... penned not long before his death.

Clearly then Paul’s enjoyment of our Lord’s self-sacrifice – that He ‘gave Himself’ – remained with the apostle throughout his Christian experience. Make no mistake, the thought that our Lord ‘gave Himself’ for us is neither too complex and difficult for the youngest Christian to understand, nor too simplistic and elementary for the most mature Christian to revel in. This is something we can ever outgrow.

And I am sure that, from the youngest to the oldest, we each treasure the words of Galatians 2 quoted earlier concerning ‘the Son of God, who *loved me and gave Himself* for me’.

On Friday, I received an email from a friend which reminded me of something once said by Karl Barth, a very influential theologian of the last century. At the age of 76 – with his famed commentary on Romans long behind him,¹⁵ and then well on his way through his thirteen volumes of *Church Dogmatics*¹⁶ – Barth was asked by a student at a Theological Seminary¹⁷ in the States what had been the most momentous discovery of his long theological life. Barth replied, ‘Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so’.¹⁸ No, you can’t outgrow that.

The second verse of John Eddison’s hymn ‘At the cross of Jesus’ reads :

At the cross of Jesus
Patiently He bore
Bitter shame and sorrow,
Grief and anguish sore.
Through eternal ages
I shall never know
What he had to suffer,
Why He loved me so.

And I suspect that Mr. Eddison is right ... that ‘I shall never know ... why He loved me so’.¹⁹

Footnotes

¹ Tit. 2. 13-14.

² From Thomas Kelly's hymn, 'We'll sing of the Shepherd that died'; number 42 in Hymns of Light and Love.

³ Gal. 1. 3-4.

⁴ Eph. 5. 2

⁵ Eph. 5. 25.

⁶ 1 Tim. 2. 5-6.

⁷ John 17. 5.

⁸ Isa. 42. 8.

⁹ Isa. 6. 1-5.

¹⁰ Luke 22. 19.

¹¹ Mark 15. 44-45.

¹² Mark 10. 45.

¹³ In all likelihood, Galatians was written before the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

¹⁴ See F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pages 55-56.

¹⁵ First published in Germany in 1918, and thoroughly re-written for the second edition of 1922.

¹⁶ Written over three and a half decades – and then not finished.

¹⁷ Richmond Theological Seminary in 1962.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay* (Fontana), page 124. See <http://www.thegreatbooks.com/wormsguide.pdf>.

¹⁹ John Eddison also wrote number 870 in Praise! ...

*Father, although I cannot see
the future you have planned,
and though the path is sometimes dark
and hard to understand,
yet give me faith, through joy and pain,
to trace your loving hand.*

*When I recall that in the past
your promises have stood
through each perplexing circumstance
and every changing mood,
I rest content that all things work
together for my good.*

*Whatever, then, the future brings
of good or seeming ill,
I ask for strength to follow you
and grace to trust you still;
and I would look for no reward,
except to do your will.*