
The Paradoxical Suffering of the Unsuffering God

Cyril defends the simultaneous unsuffering-suffering of the Word of God

[The Nestorians] argue that to have to say that the same one suffers and does not suffer makes it seem like a fairy tale, and indeed verges on the incredible. For either, as God, he has not suffered at all, or alternatively, if he is said to have suffered, then how can he be God? For such reasons the one who suffers must be understood to be only the one who is of David's line.

Is not this an evident demonstration of their feebleness of mind to choose to say and think this? God the Father did not give us any common man taken up in the rank of mediator and artificially holding the glory of sonship, honoured with the conjunction of a relationship; no, he gave him who is above all creation, who for our sake came in our likeness, the Word who issues from his own being, so that he might be seen as the equivalent of the life of all. In my opinion it is the height of absurdity, as I have already said, to find fault with the Only Begotten, when he did not disdain the economy and became flesh, and accuse him of having militated against his own glory by choosing inappropriately to suffer in the flesh. My good friend, this was a matter of the salvation of the whole world.

And since on this account he wished to suffer, even though he was beyond the power of suffering in his nature as God, then he wrapped himself in flesh that was capable of suffering, and revealed it as his very own, so that even the suffering might be said to be his because it was his own body which suffered and no one else's. Since the manner of the economy allows him blamelessly to choose both to suffer in the flesh, and not to suffer in the Godhead (for the selfsame was at once God and man) then our opponents surely argue in vain, and foolishly debase the power of the mystery, when they think they have made a worthy synthesis. It seems that the fact he so chose to suffer in the flesh was somehow blameworthy of him, but in another way it was glorious, for the resurrection has testified that he is greater than death and corruption.¹

Cyril's analogy for the unsuffering-suffering of the Word – iron in a fire

The force of any comparison falters here and falls short of the truth, although I can bring to mind a feeble image of this reality which might lead us from something tangible, as it were, to the very heights and to what is beyond all speech. It is like iron, or other such material, when it is put in contact with a raging fire. It receives the fire into itself, and when it is in the very heart of the fire, if someone should beat it, then the material itself takes the battering but the nature of the fire is in no way injured by the one who strikes. This is how you should understand the way in which the Son is said both to suffer in the flesh and not to suffer in the Godhead. Although, as I said, the force of any comparison is feeble, this brings us somewhere near the truth if we have not deliberately chosen to disbelieve the holy scriptures.²

¹ *On The Unity of Christ* (McGuckin, pp.117-8)

² *On The Unity of Christ* (McGuckin, pp.130-1)

Suffering and death were endured by the Word's holy flesh (not the Word himself directly)

Just as “he made him who knew no sin into sin for our sake that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (for the nature of man has been justified in him), so in the same way he caused him who knew not death (since the Word is life and life-giver) to suffer in the flesh. But insofar as he is considered as God he remained outside suffering in order that we might live through him and in him. For this reason the suffering of Christ has been called “the likeness of death”. So it is written: “If we become one being with him in the likeness of his death, so shall we be of his resurrection” (Rom 6:5).

The Word was alive even when his holy flesh was tasting death, so that when death was beaten and corruption trodden underfoot the power of the resurrection might come upon the whole human race. It is a fact that “just as in Adam all men die, so all men shall be made alive in Christ” (1 Cor 15:22). How else should we say that the mystery of the economy of the Only Begotten in the flesh brought help to the nature of man, except that he who is above all creation brought himself down into a self-emptying and lowered himself in our condition? How else could it be except that the body which lay under corruption became a body of life so as to become beyond death and corruption?³

The suffering and death of the incarnate Word

So it is we say that he both suffered and rose again; not meaning that the Word of God suffered in his own nature either the scourging, or the piercing of the nails, or the other wounds, for the divinity is impassible because it is incorporeal. But in so far as that which had become his own body suffered, then he himself is said to suffer these things for our sake, because the Impassible One was in the suffering body.

We understand his death in the same manner. By nature the Word of God is immortal and incorruptible, and Life, and Life-giver, and yet since his own body ‘tasted death by the grace of God on behalf of all’, as Paul says (Heb.2.9) then he himself is said to have suffered death for our sake. This does not mean he underwent the experience of death in terms of his [own] nature for it would be madness to say or think such a thing; rather, as I have said, it means that his flesh tasted death. Similarly when his flesh was raised up, once again we say that the resurrection is his. This does not mean that he fell into corruption, certainly not, but again that his own body was raised.⁴

³ *On The Unity of Christ* (McGuckin, p.115)

⁴ *Second Letter to Nestorius 5* (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy*, p.264)