

The church and its history » Anthropology » The problem of suffering

The starting point for the Christian understanding of suffering is the messianic self-understanding of Jesus himself. A temptation to power and self-exaltation lay in the late Jewish promise of the coming of the Messiah-Son of man. The Gospel According to Matthew described the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness as a temptation to worldly power. Jesus himself deeply disappointed his disciples' notions aiming at power and exaltation, in that he taught them, in accordance with Isaiah, chapter 53: "The Son of man will suffer many things." In Jesus' announcements of suffering the Christian understanding of suffering is clearly expressed: suffering is not the final aim and end in itself in the realization of human destiny; it is the gateway to resurrection, to rebirth, to new creation. This idea receives its clarification from the Christian understanding of sin. Sin as the misuse of human freedom has led humans into total opposition against God. Turning to God can therefore take place only when the results of this rebellion are overcome in all levels of human being, all the way to physical corporeality.

In the early church the sign of the cross was not considered a glorification of suffering but a "sign of victory" (*tropaion*) in the sense of the ancient triumphal sign that was set up at the place where the victorious turning point of the battle took place. The cross was likewise considered the "dread of the demons," since as a victory sign it struck terror into the hitherto ruling demonic powers of the world. An ancient church hymn of the cross spoke of the "cross of the beauty of the Kingdom of God." The emperor Constantine, following his vision of a cross in the heavens, fastened to the standards of the imperial legions the cross, which was considered the victory sign for the community of Christians hitherto persecuted by the Roman Empire, and elevated it to a token of military triumph over the legions of his pagan foes that were assembled under the sign of the old gods.

In the Christian understanding, suffering also does not appear as suffering simply under the general conditions of human existence in this world; it is instead coupled with the specifically Christian idea of the imitation of Christ. Individual Christians are called to follow the example of Christ; incorporation into the body of Christ is granted to those who are ready to carry out within themselves Christ's destiny of suffering, death, and resurrection. The early church's characterization of the Christian was that of *Christophoros*—"bearer of Christ." Suffering was an unalterable principle in the great drama of freedom, which was identical with the drama of redemption.