

LIKE A FLINT

One year ago, on Earth Day, a day on which some show support for protection of the earth's environment, Wynn Bruce, a Buddhist, sat down in the plaza of the United States Supreme Court building, and set himself on fire. Supreme Court police officers tried to save him, but he died of his injuries. Kritee Kanko, a Buddhist priest, and a climate scientist at the Environmental Defense Fund, was a friend of Bruce. Concerning Bruce's death she stated, "This act is not suicide. This is a deeply fearless act of compassion to bring attention to climate crisis." Bruce's own father shared Kanko's sentiment. Bruce was an admirer of Thích Quảng Đức, a Vietnamese Buddhist who, forty-nine years before, killed himself in the same manner in order to draw attention to his government's treatment of Buddhists. This practice has a long history in Buddhism and Hinduism. According to Hindu legend, the Hindu goddess, Sati, set herself on fire in order to honor her husband who had been dishonored by her father. This is the foundation for the ancient Hindu practice of Sati, in which a Hindu widow honors her late husband by sitting upon his funeral pyre. Christian missionary Willam Carey campaigned for the banning of this abominable practice, and, in the year of Our Lord Eighteen-hundred Twenty-nine, the British government made it a criminal offense. The burning of one's self alive has come to be called 'self-immolation,' but this is not what the term means. The word 'immolate' means 'to sacrifice.' Strictly speaking, then, to immolate oneself is to sacrifice oneself. In the Christian view, to commit suicide, to kill oneself, is a great sin, the sin of murder. God forbids the taking of a human life without His permission. Yet, to sacrifice oneself to God, where 'sacrifice' means 'to surrender or suffer to be lost for the sake of obtaining something,' is an act of righteousness. It is an act of righteousness that Christ made, and which He bids His followers make. The follower of Christ must be willing to do anything He asks, and to give up anything He asks, including his own life. If the pagan can sacrifice his life for a false cause, the Christian can sacrifice his life for the true one.

In the days of the divided monarchy of Israel, the people of God were often in high rebellion. Isaiah the prophet called the people of God to repentance, and he warned them that, if they did not repent, then God would destroy them. (Isaiah 1–12) God would punish His people for their sins and He would do so because of their sins. Isaiah said:

Thus saith the LORD, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away. Wherefore, when I came, was there no man? when I called, was there none to answer? Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver? behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a wilderness: their fish stinketh, because there is no water, and dieth for thirst. I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering. (Isaiah 50:1–3)

The people pitied themselves, and blamed God for their distress, but the Lord told them that they had no one to blame but themselves. The Lord did not divorce His people because of some small displeasure, and He did not sell them into slavery because He had a debt to pay. The people would come into bondage in Babylon, but their bondage would be the consequence of their sin. The people would be separated from the Lord, but their separation would be because of their transgressions. God sent prophets to His people, but the people did not receive them. God through His prophets called the people to repentance, but the people would answer the call. It was no fault of God that the people were judged; He was not to blame for their captivity in Babylon. It was not

as if God was powerless to redeem them. God can redeem His people, as He redeemed them from Egypt. God by His power caused the Red Sea to dry up so that His people might escape Pharaoh's army. He caused rivers to run in the desert so that His people might have water to quench their thirst. He caused the Nile river, the river of the enemy of His people, to turn to blood, causing the fish in it to die and rot, so that they had no food, and no water. He caused Egypt to be shrouded in darkness, so that the people could not see, a symbol of their spiritual darkness. If the Lord could so powerfully redeem His people from bondage in Egypt, then He could redeem them from the bondage of their sins.

The people of Israel were God's covenant people. They had at Mount Sinai sworn to obey the Lord, and to do what was pleasing to Him. Yet, they continually broke covenant with the Lord, and did as they themselves pleased. They loved neither God nor man, but themselves only. There would come one Israelite, however, who would perfectly serve the Lord. This Servant would love God and man, and perfectly serve them; He would live, not for Himself, but for others; He would sacrifice Himself. That one says of Himself:

The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned. The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. He is near that justifieth me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is mine adversary? let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD will help me; who is he that shall condemn me? (Isaiah 50:4–9)

The Lord would give this Servant wisdom and grace to speak to the weary words of strength and comfort. Every morning He would rise to hear the Lord speak to Him. The Lord would command His Servant, and His Servant would hear Him, and obey Him. His Servant would not rebel against the Lord, or turn away from Him. He would never resist the Lord's will. He would be so dutiful, so willing to serve, that He would do whatever the Lord asked, no matter what it would cost Him, and it would cost Him greatly. Sinful men would resent Him for His righteousness. They would hate Him because God and the people love Him. They would persecute Him because He would call attention to their sins. They would mistreat Him because people would follow Him, and not them. He would, in order to fulfill the will of God, have His back to be beaten, and His beard plucked out. He would be shamed and spat upon. He would not lash out, however. He would suffer indignity and injury, but He would do so with dignity, and with righteousness. He would rely upon the grace of the Lord, and so He would never be disgraced. He would set His face as flint, which is to say, He would resolutely serve the Lord, and nothing would deter Him; therefore, He would never be ashamed. He would be reviled and slandered, but the Lord is near to Him and would vindicate Him. He would defy His accusers to face Him before the judge of the universe. He would challenge His opposition to stand next to Him. The Lord God is His aid, so no man can condemn Him.

Of course, Jesus is the perfect Servant of the Lord of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke. When Jesus began His earthly ministry, He went to a synagogue in the city of Nazareth, and He read out this passage from the book of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering

of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18, 19; compare Isaiah 61:1, 2)

Then Jesus said, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” Concerning the response of the hearers, Saint Luke wrote, “And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.” (Luke 4:22) Jesus later, in the temple, said, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” (John 7:37, 38) When the Scribes and Pharisees asked the officers why they did not arrest Jesus, they answered, “Never man spake like this man.” (John 7:46) The ceremonial law of Moses was a heavy burden to bear, and Jesus said to those weary of the burden, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30; compare Matthew 23:4; Acts 15:10; Galatians 5:1) Jesus spoke to people words of hope and comfort. Saint John wrote that Jesus was “full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Jesus spoke, not His own words, but the words His Father gave Him to speak. He said:

He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day. For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, he gave me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak. (John 12:48-50; compare John 7:16; 8:26)

Jesus did not do His own will, but the will of God. Jesus obeyed the will of God, even unto death. Concerning His death, He said:

When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him. (John 8:28, 29) compare John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38)

Jesus spoke the words that His father gave Him to say, and He did the works His Father gave Him to do.

Men persecuted Jesus. They reviled Him and slandered Him. They said He was a sinner (John 9:24); they said He was possessed by a demon (John 7:20; 8:48); they said He was in league with Beelzebub, prince of demons. (Matthew 12:24) Yet, He never reviled in return.

Jesus’s enemies several times sought to kill Him. (John 7:1) Jesus knew that He had to suffer and to die. This was the work that God gave Him to do, and He was ready to do it. More than once He told his disciples what He was destined to do. On the first occasion, He told them “how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.” (Matthew 16:21) On the second occasion, He said to them. “The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: And they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again.” (Matthew 17:22, 23) Jesus knew the suffering He had to endure, because He had before His incarnation, even before time itself, agreed with His Father to endure it. Saint Luke recorded that, shortly after this, “it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51) When the time had come for Jesus to return to His Father in Heaven, Jesus steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem to die. He made His

face like flint. He was bound and determined to fulfill the will of God for Him. On the third occasion, Jesus said:

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again. (Matthew 20:18, 19)

Jesus did go to Jerusalem, and, when He arrived, He, knowing that His time was short, said:

The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour. Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name. (John 12:23–27)

God from heaven answered Jesus. He said, “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again.” (John 12:28) Jesus, as the Son of God, perfectly understood the divine principles that death leads to life, that humiliation comes before exaltation, and that service is greatness. Jesus loved God and man more than life itself, and He was prepared to obey God all the way to death, and He was prepared to give His life for His people. If a man loves his life more than he loves Jesus, then he will perish; if He loves Jesus more than life itself, then He will have eternal life. If any man would be a disciple of Jesus, then he has to be the servant of Jesus, and, if He will be the servant of Jesus, then Jesus’s Father will honor him for his service. Jesus had to give His pure life for corrupt sinners, and this troubled Him. Yet, He did not ask His Father in heaven to save Him from it, because He and His Father had agreed that this is what He would do. The Son of God came into the world to serve His Father, and the one who follows Jesus must serve Jesus.

The Jews finally arrested Jesus, and turned Him over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, on a charge of treason. They alleged that Jesus climbed to be the King of the Jews. After examining Jesus, Pilate judged Him to be innocent, and would let Him go, but the Jews demanded that Jesus be crucified. When Pilate saw that his attempts to release Jesus were to no avail, and that a riot was starting, he had Jesus scourged, and then gave the order for crucifixion.

Saint Matthew recorded the manner in which the Roman soldiers treated Jesus:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers. And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe. And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head. And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him. (Matthew 27:27–31)

The soldiers nailed Jesus's hands and feet to the cross, and then lifted him up. As Jesus suffered crucifixion, people that passed by insulted Him, shook their heads at Him, and mocked Him. The thieves who were crucified on either side of Him mocked Him. The religious leaders of Israel mocked Him, and said, "He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God." (Matthew 27:43) But Jesus did trust in God, and God would deliver Him, but not in the way the people would expect. Finally, Jesus died.

Jesus, from the beginning of His earthly ministry to the end, suffered for righteousness sake; yet, he was undeterred. He knew that God is always right and good, and Jesus, because He is always right and good, was always determined to fulfill the will of God.

Saint Paul gives perspective on Jesus's obedience. He wrote:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11)

Jesus is the eternal Son of God. Yet, He humbly laid aside His rights and privileges as the Son of God so that He might serve both God and man. As a man, He obeyed God, even dying an excruciating death, and He did it for the good of sinful men. He knew that, if He humbled Himself, and obeyed the will of His Father in heaven, then His Father in heaven would vindicate Him by raising Him from the dead, and exalting Him to the position of ruler of the world. He, in His perfect obedience, left His followers an example. His followers should have the same mind that He had. They ought to sacrifice their lives to God, by denying themselves, and doing good for Him. They ought to sacrifice their lives for men, by denying themselves, and doing good to them. Jesus said, "Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 26–28)

Let us believe that Jesus is the Son of God who perfectly obeyed His Father in heaven. Let us know that God has made Him King of kings, and Lord of lords. Let us follow His perfect example of sacrifice.

Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen.