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Son of Calepin: The French Scene

by Louis Allen

Violence at Nanterre

When I was saying goodbye to Michel Butor on the southbound platform of Durham station some months ago, I asked him if he did not feel that student activity on the violent left, in France and elsewhere, had already reached a peak, and that what students really expected from teachers was not discussion towards reform, but a reason for order. There was, he replied, nothing more repugnant to him than the teaching of order to the young (I was very much reminded of Camus's embarrassed proclamation to a group of students when asked to address them on some serious topic, 'I would rather preach passion to you') and the only valid thing to tell them was to explore and risk. I had been full of Camus and limits when I asked the question, having only a few months before

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lectured on *L'Homme révolté* to an audience of African students on Camus's depiction of the pitfalls of millenarian revolution, its constant history of over-reaching and failure; and I had been roundly rebuked by nearly all the expatriate professors—European and American—on the staff of that African university: in their view, what might have been a careful indication of 'brakes' in Britain or Europe could be only a counsel of cowardly despair in modern Africa, where the first lesson needed was revolt.

Butor clearly felt this about France, too, but whatever one's views about the events of May, 1968, and the legend it has left behind it, in the most conspicuous case of Nanterre it seems to me that the reasonable limits of revolt were crossed long ago. Post-Gaullist France may—to put it mildly—be an inadequate symbol of the good liberal society but there is no doubt that certain student groups at Nanterre are interested only in destroying the university in order to strike at the society which maintains it. As one of France's new universities, Nanterre has always stood as a paradoxical challenge to the shanty town which surrounds it—but it was never clear how you got rid of the slums by demolishing the university. This needs saying, even though the modes of repression employed by the French police, when called into Nanterre as the result of a request by the Faculty Board (though without notifying the Administration when they would come in), demand a sympathetic ear from no one. On 27th February, and on 2nd and 3rd March, Nanterre became a battlefield. The Dean of Letters, Paul Ricoeur, had already been a victim of crude violence: on 26th January he was assaulted by a left-wing group in the corridor of the Faculty, spat upon, and covered with the contents of a dustbin. Ricoeur had declared that the maintenance of order in the Faculty was not a reason for calling in the police—but that, when the administration could no longer guarantee the safety (*sécurité*) of those who used its buildings, then the time had come to do so. The Faculty Board (*conseil de gestion*) decided, by twenty-nine votes to two (with three abstentions) to turn the roads of the university into public roads (the process known as 'banalisation'), i.e. to make Nanterre directly subject to police intervention. At four in the afternoon of 27th February, five police cars entered the campus, and two of them began to patrol the side-roads. Soon the students began to stone them, then to put up barricades of tables and chairs to stop them moving. When the police got out of their cars, the students came to blows with them, and chairs were showered from upper stories. The police staged a baton charge, and entered the buildings.

The Minister of the Interior (Raymond Marcellin) and the deans of Faculties (or their delegates) discussed over the weekend how to dispose the police forces but on Monday the students took the initiative from them. A group of right-wing law students formed

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a barrier round the examination rooms to ensure that examinees could be examined. Left-wing students attacked them; about 250 others, as they were leaving a meeting of the Faculty of Letters, attacked the police; twenty-eight police and four students were injured.

At this point Ricoeur made public his disapproval of the 'banalisation' of Nanterre, or rather the indecent haste of the police in taking advantage of the turning-public of the university's precincts: 'Its immediate carrying out in the shape of a demonstration of force leading to an irruption into the university buildings, without a prior request on my part, has deprived this measure of the effects which the Faculty Board expected from it on the plane of security.' Olivier Guichard, the Minister of Education, curtly replied that 'the government had the duty to place the campus under the surveillance of the police', and Maurice Clavel, from the other end of the spectrum, scornfully asked Ricoeur, in the columns of the *Nouvel Observateur*, what other result he could have expected. 'You cannot be a professor and a cop at the same time', declared Ricoeur's wife, before her husband, in a signal and predictable defeat of good intentions, resigned as Dean. When a man like Ricoeur is forced into calling the police into his own campus, the triumph for the left wing is a very sorry one. No doubt Sartre's young protégé, Alain Geismar, of the movement *Cause révolutionnaire*, will not be satisfied until total disruption is brought about. But not all the left feels like this, and there are many groups who see that to break the heart of the best liberals in French university life is to play directly into the hands of fascism. Ricoeur's fate had already been that of several of his predecessors at Nanterre. What they did not receive, and what Ricoeur has received, was the support of the Trotskyist organization 'Ligue communiste' which has a cell at Nanterre run by Alain Krivine, the Trotskyist candidate in the last presidential elections. 'It is a criminal act', declared Krivine, 'to treat the forces of reform (i.e. Ricoeur) as if they were the forces of reaction.' Elected dean by a joint staff-student committee on 16th April, 1969, Ricoeur had already, in the previous summer, indicated what a tight-rope act was required of those who wanted to reform the French university system within the limits of what was reasonable and possible, without giving in to a 'total and inexhaustible (and exhausting?) revolutionary project'.

His past is unimpeachable. A Protestant philosopher, author of works on Marcel, Jaspers and Husserl, he created a 'university of captivity' in a POW camp in East Germany during the war, and later joined the editorial advisory committee of *Esprit*. You cannot treat with these particular students, he now thinks, because they are representative of no one but themselves. Whereas there is a case for establishing agreements, perhaps on a trade union basis, with the vast majority of left-wing students. Aware that the university is not merely an expression

of society, but also a factor for calling society into question, Ricoeur regards himself as a 'man of dialogue' and points out that he took no important decision without consulting the permanent committee of the Faculty (one professorial representative, one from the assistants, two student reps). He was also faced by his Faculty Board, some of whom expected him to shut down lectures—when he insisted there was still opportunity for negotiation and conciliation. But he did not hesitate to condemn those students who 'cannot define the boundary between polemical discussion, however lively, and common law crimes'. (Conversation with René Backmann in *Nouvel Observateur*, 14-15, No. 273, 2nd-5th February, 1970.) Krivine's intervention is interesting as showing that by no means all the most articulate of left-wing intellectuals are automatically behind the trend represented by Alain Geismar and defended by Sartre in his take-over of the newspaper *La Cause du peuple*. Sartre has always felt a compulsive need to be on the side of the *casseurs*. It may seem unsophisticated to assume that this derives from a dissatisfaction with mere verbalization which is Sartre's own greatest temptation—but the regularity of his appeal to violence is bound to make one think that it does in fact derive from some such romanticism of the physical aspects of revolution.

Fascism at Vincennes?

Nanterre is not the only university which has suffered from the excesses of the forces of dissent and those of the forces of order. Applicants for teaching jobs who have passed through Vincennes—where Anthony Sampson and Christine Brooke-Rose have taught—are already finding that this counts as a black mark in their application (*Nouvel Observateur*, 290, p. 21) and the departments of law and economics, by the fiat of the Minister of Education, M. Olivier Guichard, are only allowed to grant 'licences libres', i.e. first-degree qualifications which show the candidate has passed the course but do not carry, as the ordinary *licence* does, the statutory right to teach the subject. On 19th April this year, the 950 students of philosophy at Vincennes learned that their subject had been added to the list, and that they too would be awarded only a 'licence libre'. In defence of this action the Minister has declared that 'the type of study undertaken at Vincennes does not guarantee the minimum knowledge required in a teacher. Learning logic, learning to reason, that's what philosophy is; whereas at Vincennes nearly all the teaching is concerned with political philosophy.' The philosophy department is being penalized as a 'militant left department in the person of its final year students', and they and the Faculty Board (*conseil de gestion*) are appealing against the decision, since it was taken with doubtful legality in the course of the year, not before the year had begun. Those who have decided it might be safer to transfer will find the Minister has almost blocked this, too,

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insisting on examinations to establish equivalence between Vincennes and other faculties, on the grounds that Vincennes has a number of students who have not passed the *baccalauréat*. 'If they adopted normal teaching programmes', says a Ministry official, 'all the differences would be solved.' In other words, if Vincennes gave up its *raison d'être* as an experimental new university and returned to traditional methods, everything would slip back into place.

Oddly enough, industry and commerce have not followed in the footsteps of the Ministry. Many industrialists have visited Vincennes to recruit staff, and at least one has declared that he doesn't give a rap whether a student is from Vincennes or not. Even such a sensitive area as the news and press agency *Havas* has declared that more importance is attached to personality than to the degree—'we have no prejudice against Vincennes'.

There are, though, other disturbing things inside Vincennes itself. Some students found a meeting hall had been bugged, and, accompanied by the dean, traced the bugging to a group of *appariteurs* (porters, laboratory assistants, etc.). These were appointed, it seems, not by the Minister of Education but by the Minister of the Interior, and themselves considered their function to be watching out for student revolutionaries. They constituted, in fact, a Nazi cell. A notebook seized from one of them displayed graffiti of a swastika-bedecked army or police officer (high peaked cap and jackboots) pointing a pistol at a 'dirty student' (long hair and jeans). Another showed a masked executioner, also wearing swastika insignia, preparing to decapitate another student, and breathing the usual fire and slaughter against black students and Jews. The dean secured their dismissal.

I'm not too sure how to take this after reading Jean-Marie Domenach's scathing dismissal of the Vincennes students' reaction to the episode in the April number of *Esprit*. The burden of what he wrote is briefly this: he belongs to a generation which has had to deal with *real* Nazis, not the pathetic mythomaniacs of Vincennes, who show the usual sub-normal mentality of jacks-in-office in love with a uniform and official functions, probably ex-Colonial infantry, OAS, etc. ('you can easily imagine what they're recruited from'). The only danger, he thinks, is to take them seriously.

Anti-semitism at Orléans and elsewhere

The anti-semitism in their leaflet is significant, though, I should have thought, of a disturbing trend that is on the increase in France. Edgar Morin's recent book about the cruel absurdities of Orléans (*La Rumeur d'Orléans*, Seuil) has shown that this contagion can, on a basis of pure fiction, *verifiable as such*, pass like wildfire through a whole modern French town, and one without much history of anti-semitism, as hotly as in the days of the Dreyfus affair. The story

always centres on dress-shops. A young man goes to the shop with his fiancée, waits outside, becomes disturbed when she hasn't come out after an hour, goes in himself, finds her missing, makes his way down to the cellars, and finds her unconscious, trussed up in a large trunk ready to be shipped off to Buenos Aires. A needle hidden in a brassière she was trying on is supposed to have drugged her, completing the catalogue of horror—Jews, white slavery, drugs. Five such shops in Orléans, all run by Jews, were smeared in this way, and girls were named; all, incidentally, shown never to have left the town. Morin's book demonstrates with staggering clarity how this kind of collective dementia can afflict an entire French town in the 1960s. Yet, as Emmanuel Berl pointed out in his review (*Nouvel Observateur*, 91, p. 19), 'in no civilization has madness run riot as much as in ours....' As events proved: Morin's book observed the phenomenon in embryo, and it appeared confined to Orléans. Then suddenly, in April this year, similar rumours began to crop up in Amiens ('the police are hand in glove with them and Pompidou is behind them'), in Limoges, in Dinan. The details are those of the common source of white-slavery-cum-gangster films but, say the investigating team of *L'Express*, 'The role of conductor is often played by girls' schools, and ladies' hairdressers. A nun, or a priest, is often a link in the chain'; though, to be fair, they observe that priests are often among those who speak out most frankly against it: 'I think the closed-in aspect of provincial towns favours the spread of calumny', said the abbé Claude Séjouré to *L'Express* (No. 979, p. 18). 'An entire population, the women in particular, finds itself torn between the bourgeois Orléans of yesterday and the Orléans of today, in full expansion. People's minds become *disponible*.' It is, as J-F. Kahn points out in the same issue, a fearful word in this context, and the history of French Catholics and anti-semitism since the Revolution gives ample cause for alarm. Pierre Sorlin has already given a full account of the role of the Assumptionists and their newspaper *La Croix* in the growth of the contagion. Now a more general survey by Pierre Pierrard, *Juifs et Catholiques Français* (Fayard, 1970), traces the history back to the abbé Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* (1797) as the source of a myth which attributed the Revolution to the conspiracy of secret societies, upon which the following century laid the myth of a 'Judaeo-masonic' plot. Bad theology and worse history combined to produce a social and religious background in which priests by the thousand contributed to a fund for the widow of Col. Henry (whose perjury had ensured the imprisonment of Dreyfus), attaching to their gifts notes with such sentiments as—'For a bedside rug made from the skins of Yids, to be trampled on morning and evening' (5 francs from the abbé Cros, ex-lieutenant); 'A priest convinced of the perversity of the Jews' (abbé E.B., Paris, 0 frs 50), 'Down with all republicans,

tarred with the same brush—yids, huguenots, freemasons, and all those who are judaized like them' (a parish priest from the diocese of Bayeux); 'A Marist father who would like to see free Catholic education produce men like Drumont, Lasies and Max Régis' (then the most notorious anti-semites in France) (0 frs 50)—and much more in the same vein.

The contagion ran in Rome, too, and it is no surprise to learn that Streicher's *Der Stürmer* found some of its most vicious quotations in the columns of the Jesuit *Civiltà Cattolica.*

The case of Judith Miller

Vincennes has also recently seen the dismissal of Mme Judith Miller, which parallels recent cases at LSE and Birmingham. The daughter of the distinguished Freudian theorist Jacques Lacan, Mme Miller is married to a young philosophy assistant with whom she taught at Besançon. At Vincennes, her subject is the political philosophy of Mao Tse-tung and unfortunately for her she gave an interview to two writers of a book on the crisis in the French universities (Madeleine Chapsal and Michèle Manceaux, *Des professeurs pourquoi faire?*, Seuil) part of which was reproduced in *L'Express* (16th-22nd March, 1970). In the course of this interview she stated quite explicitly that she saw the French universities as the servant of the bourgeois capitalist system, which had to be destroyed, and that she wished the state of the university to go from bad to worse. This interview was noted in the Ministry, and it was not long before Mme Miller received a letter from the Minister notifying her that her career in higher education in France was at an end. Her reputation as a teacher was high, but one can see that the forthright expression of her views left very little choice to a Minister situated as Guichard is, and given the mood of diminishing tolerance in France as a whole towards the violence employed to achieve student ends. Nor was it a question of being tendentiously reported. Mme Miller had declared that she would be against those who held power at Vincennes 'until her last breath', that between the communists and herself it was 'war to the death', that her view of a proper university was 'a place where we can do what we did in May, i.e. reflect on what interests us, whether rewarded by degrees or not', that sooner or later the denunciation of the politics of the bourgeois communist party would lead to a physical confrontation, and each camp was preparing its methods. . . .

I was reading the *Satyre Ménippée* recently. It's the most celebrated piece of religious polemic of 16th-century France, published in 1594, but one or two passages in it have a very contemporary ring when one looks at the physical devastation of Nanterre, and the canker at the heart of liberal educationists who find themselves defenceless against those who refuse to accept a common ground of

debate: 'We are held in captivity, more serfs and slaves than Christians in Turkey and Jews in Avignon. We have no more will, no say in any matter. Nothing we can call our own, nothing of which we can say, "This is mine". All belongs to you, Gentlemen, you who stand with your feet on our throats and fill our houses with your garrisons. Our privileges and ancient freedoms have gone. Our court of Parliament is null; our Sorbonne is a brothel, and the University turned into a wilderness. But the worst of all our woes is that amongst so many misfortunes we are not allowed to complain or ask for help; even when faced by the most extreme situations, we are forced to say that we are in good case, and are only too happy to be unhappy in such a good cause.

'O Paris, which art no longer Paris, but a den of wild beasts, an asylum and safe retreat for thieves, murderers and assassins, wilt thou never recall thy dignity, and remember what thou hast been, in comparison with what thou now art?'

Are Dutch Catholics Sectarian?

The Church in France seems to be moving tentatively into positions which seem at times to be as productive of strife as those of the militant students. In *Franc-parler pour aujourd'hui*, the Jesuit André Manaranche gives a notably skilful dressing-down to those who are too concerned with the visible secular progress of the Church to the detriment of its real universality in time as well as space. Those of us who have thought of ourselves, however much our flesh may have crept at the word, as fairly progressive Catholics, will feel ourselves hit, and well hit, by some of his strictures, though he flails too widely. He attacks, for instance, what he calls 'false biblicalism' and stigmatizes the internal struggles of the European churches as a 'rich man's luxury': the frivolity of opulence when seen from the point of view of the poor churches outside Europe. He is particularly scathing about the Dutch, who are the prime examples of the sociological error, ultimately the anti-mission error *par excellence*, which would enclose a priest within the sociological limits of his own community of language and class, depriving the Church of its essential Pauline aspiration to transcend race and politics: 'the claims which are being made in Holland with increasing passion demonstrate not the freedom of a Church, as one might be tempted to believe at first sight, but instead its incapacity to transcend its sociological conditioning—that of a super-urbanized society, comfortably off and sectarian-minded (*confessionelle*)—to imagine a truly missionary priesthood cut more amply than on these measurements'.

I should like Manaranche's book to be read, because I think it puts the case not for reaction, but for pause and prudence, and puts it in terms of crisp and vigorous language devoid of sentimental piety and polemical crudities. It's stimulating to have someone so intelligent to disagree with, and it's a sign of the liberal pub-

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lishing policies of Editions du Seuil that in the same month they can publish Manaranche and an example of the kind of thing he criticizes, a stripping-down of the evangelical message to its Greek original (and the Aramaic behind that) and a rethinking of the gospel on that basis.

Claude Tresmontant's *L'enseignement de Ieschoua de Nazareth* (Editions du Seuil, 1970) attempts the impossible by ridding the good news of two millennia of accretion, and seeing it as the words of a first-century rabbi whom he refers to as 'Ieschoua' throughout, analysing key concepts, re-situating Christ in Jewish tradition, challenging the casually scornful dismissal of miracle, and bringing out the gospel as teaching, not as morality. Already known from his presentation of theism in a modern context (*Comment se pose aujourd'hui le problème de l'existence de Dieu?*, Seuil, 1966), Tresmontant shows an enviable control of biblical sources in his new book, and manages to carry off the challenge of giving newness to his re-telling. This book is, in a sense, a very real answer to Manaranche's strictures on 'false biblicalism', 'a suspect love of Scripture which serves to camouflage highly personal orthodoxies', a procedure which, he claims, always leads to a 'modern' (and he clearly means 'modernist') theology: Jesus becomes a moralist with the Kantians, socialist with the socially minded, each one uses him as a mirror in which to peer at his own sacralized face, nothing more. There is a good deal more than this in Tresmontant, largely because his book is a humble and careful exploration of the scriptural text, and the reader feels no sensation of being wilfully shaken out of a true reading.

Violence in the aisles

Reactions like those of Manaranche are comprehensible and it is difficult, without being intolerably (and intolerantly) sciolist, merely to dismiss him. His writings represent a genuine and thought-out anxiety in the face of recent developments in the Church. *Franc-parler pour notre temps* is not simply the product of a panic reflex. The extreme end of the spectrum on which he lies is, however, much more disturbing. The same monthly Seuil bulletin which includes Manaranche and Tresmontant also lists a reprint of Marc Oraison's *Une morale pour notre temps* and his new essay *la Trans-humance*. I have written at some length on Marc Oraison before (*New Blackfriars*, August, 1969, pp. 571-573, *Slant*, August/September, 1967, pp. 11-16) because I think his work deserves to be far better known here. He has that rare combination in religious writers on sexual matters of using verified and up-to-date information, a sound scriptural basis, great medical and psychological experience, and a refreshing sanity. The cries of 'Sexual maniac! Swine! Oraison to Moscow!' which greeted him on 25th January, 1970, in the Church of Notre-Dame de l'Assomption in the Paris suburb of Passy give a clue, therefore, not to what Oraison is, but to the state of mind, if

that is the word, of the so-called commandos of 'Christian youth' from the integrist organization *Occident*, who barracked him, beat him, and squirted ammonia over him, then made a triumphal exit to the strains of the Apostles' Creed sung in Latin.

The abbé's theme at Passy was an old one, 'Morality and Sex'. In an interview with Cl.-Fr. Jullien for *Nouvel Observateur*, Oraison described what happened when 150 of these 'commandos', wearing boots, carrying canes, and sporting the *fleur-de-lys*, began to break up his meeting, beating up the parish curate, the abbé Richard, and showering with eggs the parish priest who was performing a baptism in the church. 'I was, after all', he claimed, 'merely the occasion of all this. The Pope and the Archbishop of Paris came in for some of it, in accordance with their rank. What they were really getting at was the questioning Church (*l'eglise en recherche*). The contents of a bottle of ammonia hit me full in the face. Then I heard their leader, a most distinguished-looking chap, a colonel apparently, call out,"Get him out without any violence!" I can see why, now: if they could have dragged me out into the street, they would really have been able to give me a working-over. Luckily I managed to take refuge in a nearby nursing home. . . . They were from *Occident*, the *Action Française*, and the OAS too. Last year, at Sceaux, where I had already been attacked once, the commando was led by the son and son-in-law of General Zeller. These people are well organized, and they're after all those priests who, to any extent, represent the evolving Church. Fr Cardonnel (a Dominican) was roughed up at Saint Denis on 12th January. A week later it was the turn of Fr Laurentin, the *Figaro's* religious correspondent, who was attacked in the Church of Saint-Honoré d'Eylau. They don't actually expect any results, they simply like a scrap. But some of the people behind them possibly have dreams of taking power one day, to restore the moral order . . . their song of victory, their *Internationale*, is the Credo in Latin.'

'Isn't it rather odd,' he was asked, 'that you, who were refused an *Imprimatur*, and forbidden to collaborate with seminary priests, now seem quite content to be classed with Paul VI—surely you don't agree with him over Rome's resistance to the Dutch bishops?'

'Read Acts, Chapter 15', is Oraison's answer. 'After the business at Antioch, Paul puts it to Peter: must the Gentiles be converted to Judaism first, in order to follow Christ? Today, on a different plane, Paul stands for Canada, and Holland, for Suenens in Belgium; Peter stands for Rome. As in the first case, Paul will win through.'

The last word

La Transhumance, though it does not have sexual morality as its theme, gives a hint as to why Oraison does not feel the same urgency about the problem of celibacy as the Dutch clergy do. The book is a meditation on human history and purpose, its scope is inevitably

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millennial, and behind it lies Oraison's preoccupation with death as man's only real problem. We are very concerned at the moment with the role of authority in the forward march of mankind: now that sacral authority has more or less disappeared, we seek forms of functional authority to replace it, as the only kind we respect. But neither can help us to resolve *that* problem, 'which is, in the last resort, the only one . . . ' (p. 68). The reader is reminded very much of the question put by the European missionary to the terrorist Tchen in Malraux's *La Condition humaine:* 'What political creed will ever destroy death?' Whatever the direction of the slow *transhumance* which Oraison calls civilization, death is inexorably at the end for the individual, and for each individual civilisation—that is how the men of the twentieth century in fact have discovered the civilizations of the past, through the necropolises they leave behind. In an echo of Pascal and Valéry, Oraison serenely affirms that the entirety of western civilization is now on the downward slope of a vast decadence, which we will simply have to learn to cope with. Civilization is simply the artificial organization that man had to invent, as soon as that extra amount of brain put him out of the phase with Nature. We all put up with it as long as it has positive results for the majority of mankind; once it ceases to do this effectively, then we rise up against this organization, and this is precisely what is happening everywhere in the urban world now. And all the forms of revolt that we see around us, hippyism, drugs, the obsession with pornography, these are the signs of the revolt of healthy adults who do not want to die. But they are regressive: the flight into dreams, escapes through various forms of hallucination, or the desperately obsessional dominance of the most childish of sexual fantasies. . . . The real problem for Christianity is therefore how to accept this revolt which is expressed as being against older sacral structures, and to show that *some* structures are necessary if one is to do anything at all. Oraison fears nothing here, because, beyond the collapse of the old structures of Europe (for which he briskly feels very little nostalgia, and many of us, even the most profoundly de-Belloced, are bound to have this), he trusts passionately in the real presence of Jesus Christ, expressed with a Pauline intensity:

' . . . Paul knows henceforth that he *knows* nothing but Jesus and Jesus crucified. . . .

The veil of the incomprehensible, of the absurd, of the inacceptable is rent asunder. . . .

The transhumance finds its outlet.

Love which is expressed in irresistible truth, in Jesus, with all that that entails.

Because he is as strong as death.

That is, he has the last word.

Even on death.'

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