

AN UNDRAMATIC SEASON

THE EDITOR

AS we progress into the autumn many seasons conclude giving place to new ones. The cricket season closes early and ushers in its more popular rival; the holiday period retreats into albums of snapshots and picture post-cards and the season for work is supposed to recommence with new vigour and zest. Summer becomes a memory in the quieter days of October and the people of God set their faces towards the divinely created snow and mist and ice. The Church's post-pentecostal season, however, seems to linger without drama or incident until the Christian towards the end of November is startled by the announcement of the end of the world and the judgment.

Yet this period of Pentecost to Advent holds within its compass all the excitements of reaping, gathering into barns and threshing, upon the success of which man's life so largely depends. The 'Harvest Home' is a dramatic event within this Christian season which in earlier times gave heart or depression to the way in which men looked towards the coming winter. And October itself was enclosed by two ancient ceremonies adopted by the Church into Michaelmas and All Hallows when people began to look to the year ahead for their marriages or their deaths. In effect the changing of nature's seasons had its repercussions in the slowly moving liturgical season that covers the summer and the autumn. The drama of the fall of the year does not pass the altar unsanctified. And this is as we should expect since the life of the spirit touches everything and every moment of time with the divine action, bringing dramatic form out of the chaos of multiplicity and succession.

We may view this process like this: physical creation without man would be a meaningless succession of coming to be and ceasing to be, of birth, life and death. It would be a formless chaos except to the single eye of the Creator. Why birth? Why death? Corruption appears a strange annihilation before the all-powerful goodness of the Creator. Man without faith, without the wisdom of a child of God, will challenge the goodness or even existence of God before the mystery of death. But those who

cry out against the succession of creation, who begrudge birth and scream at mortality, are they who are caught up in the chaos of time and who have lost the art of dramatization which is one of the essential powers of the human spirit. Birth and death must be made to play their roles in a meaningful action which begins with God and ends with him. For this reason man has from the earliest times dramatized these fundamental aspects of his life. It is the only way to remain human as summer passes into autumn and winter, and the old man slips gently into his grave. Spring and new birth, summer and harvest, autumn and death—these were the centres of the dramatic ritual by which man seized the passing succession of time and put order and meaning into it and returned it by procession, dance and sacrifice to the divine powers. Through man the passing of the seasons was thus made religious, which is the same as saying they made it dramatic; they revealed a divine movement in the uncertain succession around them.

In the relation of the human creature to the source of his being, the Creator, lies the foundation of all drama. And for century upon century all plays were religious—the dying god like Dionysus who returns to life, the mummer's white knight resuscitated by 'the doctor', the *Quem quaeritis* the paschal source of all miracle plays—these age-old Christian and pagan performances gave a shape to the deep mystery of life and death. The mystery of being could not be itself pictured or represented except through the metaphor of these personifications. The attempt to make it intelligible and worshipful produced the ritual actions which pivoted round the drama of the spring, which was transformed and made divine by the passion, death and resurrection of our Lord.

As soon, however, as this creaturely dramatization of the movement of existence was summed up in the central event of the whole of history, the nature of this drama changed. Hitherto it was the hidden movement of nature that was thus formalized in ritual, dance and procession—and this continued to be the form of pagan rites and plays. But for the Christian the historical events of re-creation became the focal point, and these could be pictured and represented in so far as the mystery had become tangible in a human form and a human action. The myth of Dionysus and the rest became the reality of Christ.

An example will make this clearer. Before the birth of Christ a

pageant was performed each year when the Jews carried green boughs and water from the brook in the valley up the side of the hill to the altar of the Temple. There they piled the greenery round the altar and poured water before it, or built themselves huts or 'tabernacles' of the boughs—a drama that put into terms of human action the dependence of man upon the God of the heavens, the rains, the fertility of his Creation. It seems that on the first Palm Sunday our Lord was himself the centre of such a pageant, and with that the old act ceased and the new historical one began. Christians, as soon as the opportunity arose, re-created that pageant, but no longer in terms of the mystery of water and the fertility of the soil. Now it was a scene in the life of Christ who fulfilled all the actions and rituals of the old drama in the visible one of the new. Henceforth there were two layers in the Christian's ritual action—the hidden one of the natural events of the creature in relation to his Creator and the great historical event of the Son of God become man. It makes one complete dramatic action in which nature is supernaturalized. When the Christian 'shows forth the death of the Lord until he come' he does so not at first by Passion Play or Stations of the Cross but by an act with bread and wine, symbol of man's natural life on earth. But the bread becomes the body of Christ, the wine the blood of sacrifice poured out, that is the self-same historical act of the passion of our Lord. And in lesser ways the old seasonal plays of autumn are adopted by real angels and saints who assist in the drama of redemption.

In the course of time the impersonization of Christ proper to the gift of the priesthood is shared on the second, historical level by others who begin to show forth the death of our Lord in their Passion and Resurrection plays. These are both genuine drama, revealing death and even murder (on the part of the Jews) in a significant light so that they become meaningful and sacrificial. But first and foremost this is true and real in the liturgy which embraces both types of drama, the creature before his Creator and the Christ before the Father.

There is, however, an inevitable tension between these two; as the more easily imagined events of the life of Christ come to be produced as liturgical plays the 'realistic' becomes over-developed and the connection with the basic things of life becomes weak or is even broken. In this way the miracle plays

became more and more boisterous so that they were pushed away from the altar out into the market place, and in this way they paved the way for the secular theatre. At the same time the more fundamental drama of bread offered and consecrated tends to lose its significance and is performed as a 'rite' with the minimum of dramatic content. The Church and the altar become the platform of a tremendous act performed perfunctorily by the 'actors', while the play outside becomes more attractive in its secular dress, divorced as it is from its true setting.

The reader may well be asking himself by now what all this may have to do with the life of the spirit. The answer is that so long as modern man deprives his worship of God of its fundamental dramatic element, so long as he regards the post-pentecostal season or indeed any liturgical season as having nothing to do with the roots of his natural life he will be easily tempted to slide into the inevitable succession of the spiritual life without recreating it into something meaningful. The life of the spirit thus becomes a series of acts of virtue, a series of battles with temptation, a series of divine acts issuing from the altar of the church which the Christian attends on Sunday. He will look for meaningful movement only in the unreal world of the modern stage and cinema. Patterns are formed only in novels or on the screen but not in normal life, still less in the life of devotion and prayer. Or if a man tries to form a pattern in his life of the spirit it is as a rule only the unreal, un-rhythmic pattern of the ascent of a ladder. True drama reveals the pattern of life—rise and fall and rise again—not the mechanical action of a moving staircase. The Mass represents the rhythm of the rise-fall-and-rise-again of our Lord in such a way that every Christian may take his place as an actor on that stage of life. If he enters into the dual drama of the liturgical seasons he will find there the secret by which he can form a meaning in his daily life—a 'spiritual' meaning that explains himself as a whole to God.

We Christians today need to be Don Quixotes to enter into the jousts and pageants of the heavenly play in which the whole universe is cast.