

Lord, we perish', and he will rebuke our lack of faith. We shall not perish, for he has died for us. He was forsaken that we might never be alone. Here upon the Cross is the beginning of a great calm, a great order, a great companionship, and if religion means, as it must, that man meets God, why here it is in the God-Man, in Jesus, never more human, never more divine, than when upon the Cross, with a great cry, he died.



## THE TEACHING AND SPIRITUALITY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

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**I**N the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Christian life is seen in terms of the biblical theme of *exodus* or migration.<sup>1</sup> It is a theme recalling the life of the patriarchs and the generation contemporary with Moses in the desert. The spirituality of the psalms is steeped in it. The life of the pious Jew is an upward movement towards him who is pre-eminently 'the Holy One', 'the Holy One of Israel'. The first stage in this upward movement is marked by God's revelation of himself. This gives rise to faith, the initial movement towards the Most High. Faith calls for faithfulness, which is impossible without renunciation and which will improve in quality and merit with resistance to trials. The man who is not put out or discouraged by these will be confirmed in his faith and faithfulness. He will win the victory of faith, God will crown it by fulfilling his promises. These three stages are found in the traditional religious life of the Jews. The Epistle to the Hebrews takes and considers them in its turn and describes them in the light of the new covenant.

Faith rests on the Word of God. The unrivalled importance of the Word of God is brought out at the very beginning of the epistle in a majestic period difficult to translate exactly: 'In old days, God spoke to our fathers in many ways and by many means, through the prophets; now at last, in these times he has spoken

<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. Spicq, O.P., *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, introd., Editions du Cerf, 1950.

to us, with a Son to speak for him; a Son whom he has appointed to inherit all things, just as it was through him that he created this world of time' (I: 1-2).

In the Old Testament, revelations followed one another in continual succession. It was as if they formed a book, to which pages were always being added by God's Wisdom out of consideration for us. They comply with what would be required by a sensible theory of teaching-method. The means they use are extremely varied—plain statements, parables, riddles, dreams, visions, dramas, figures of speech and allegory, whether of a purely literary kind or furnished by the lessons of events. This method was inevitable because the object of revelation cannot be adequately expressed in words and because man is burdened with weakness and impotence of various sorts which keep him from covering the distance between himself and God. If God was to be understood by man, he could hardly do more than stammer out a little of the truth about himself.

All revelation is of necessity imperfect. The revelation made in the Old Testament was particularly so on account of the human intermediaries God made use of and the carnal atmosphere in which mankind was living. The prophet of the new covenant is the Son of God himself. He actually sees what he reveals, and therefore with him revelation takes its final step towards perfection. The days we are living in now are called the last of all, because they can be followed only by eternity, since the 'Son' whom the Father has appointed heir to all things—heir to all the good things mentioned in the messianic promises and heir on behalf of those whom he came to save—does in fact show us the way that leads to these good things.

Faith is obviously unreserved adherence on our part to the word of God and all that it reveals to us. The eternal Word, who possesses all the Father's unfathomable perfections, became man in order to speak to us in our own language. The assent we give by faith will therefore be full of love and affection for the living Word of the Father and absolute devotion to him. Faith is also the wholehearted acceptance of the promise promulgated by the Word.

God knows that man is essentially a nomad and that if he settles, whether in himself or in some good or creature or even in the world as a whole, he is doing violence to his spiritual aspirations.

This migratory side of man, the need he has of going somewhere else, his impulse to go beyond present time and circumstances, are emphasized by the exodus and the nomadic life of the patriarchs and fathers.

The migratory instinct receives a reassuring promise from God. The day will come when the nomad will fold up his tents for the last time. He will not be on the road for ever. Under certain conditions he will enter safe and sound into 'rest'. Salvation is the rest that comes after the arduous effort of the journey. The things that weigh us down will be thrown off, the fetters of sin will be broken. Even now, in this life, we possess this salvation in the innermost part of ourselves, for there is no break between the nomadic state and the ultimate rest; there is only continuity.

Faith is thus humble assent to the Word and absolute trust in the promise of God. The believer is certain that God will accomplish what he has promised.

'God, eager to convince the heirs of the promise [made to Abraham] that his design was irrevocable, pledged himself by an oath. Two irrevocable assurances, over which there could be no question of God deceiving us, were to bring firm confidence to us poor wanderers, bidding us cling to the hope we have in view, the anchorage of our souls. Sure and immovable, it reaches that inner sanctuary beyond the veil, which Jesus Christ, our escort, has entered already, a high priest now, eternally with the priesthood of Melchisedech' (6: 17-20).

Like the rest of the spiritual life, hope rests on Jesus. It is cast on him as an anchor is cast on firm ground. His ascension is the pledge of ours. From heaven, the sanctuary he has entered before us, he draws us to himself by the love and omnipotence that are his as High Priest, and lavishes his grace upon us to be the driving-force for the climb. 'Do not let us waver in acknowledging the hope we cherish; we have a promise from one who is true to his word' (10: 23).

The faithfulness of God, who never goes back on his word, calls for faithfulness on our part too. 'Why then, brethren, we can enter the sanctuary with confidence through the blood of Christ. He has opened for us a new, a living approach, by way of the veil, I mean his mortality. A great priest is ours, who has dominion over God's house. Let us come forward with sincere hearts in the

full assurance of the faith, our guilty consciences purified by sprinkling, our bodies washed clean in hallowed water' (10: 19-22).

Under the old covenant the high priest was the only one to enter the Holy of Holies, once a year, and that for the sake of humbling himself before the 'Holy One of Israel', who has revealed his tremendous majesty more than his other attributes, so as to provoke the sort of religious fear that would turn from idolatry a people only too inclined to adopt the scandalous worship and manners of neighbours lacking the ennobling influence of belief in the one God. The new covenant allows us free access at all times to the new sanctuary, heaven, where we can commit ourselves and our destinies to the Pontiff whose boundless mercy the epistle delights in emphasizing. Under the old covenant, access to the Holy of Holies was allowed only if a victim was sacrificed and the high priest entered with its blood, though this victim had no power of itself to bring God into the soul. In the new covenant, we have access to the Most High by a new and living way; red with the blood of Christ who, by sacrificing himself and rending his own flesh, rends the veil which has hidden God from us. We are taken up to God in the person of Christ himself, who is both priest and victim. That is the ultimate reason for the confidence behind Christian hope. Proximate reasons will be found in the perfection of the Christian's faith, his sincerity and innocence and the purifying grace of baptism. Hope springs young and enthusiastic when the whole being is made new. We receive a 'kingdom which cannot be shaken' (12: 28).

We must, then, accept the fact that our life is a pilgrimage, even if the road is difficult and we can hardly see where God is leading us, even if God perplexes us and we can see no end to our trials. Disconcerting though it is, this was the law of the exodus: the Israelites, too, went from pillar to post, retraced their steps and kicked their heels, but they were on the right road all the same. The God who had made them the promise was leading them to the promised land.

The fundamental movement of hope in the patriarchs is revealed to us by the inspired author with a lyricism which is the fruit at once of perfect art and of an exceptional gift bestowed on him as a contemplative. The texts command attention of themselves both in their beauty and by the fine shades of doctrine

in them. 'He to whom the name of Abraham was given showed faith when he left his home, obediently, for the country which was to be his inheritance; left it without knowing where his journey would take him. Faith taught him to live as a stranger in the land he had been promised for his own, encamping there with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of a common hope; looking forward all the while to that city which has true foundations [unlike tents, which are toys for the wind to play with], which is God's design and God's fashioning' (11: 8-10).

The aspirations aroused in the souls of the patriarchs by God himself infallibly turned them towards a land that would not be exposed to earthly vicissitudes, unlike the one in which they were living. 'In faith they died; for them the promises were not [fully] fulfilled, but they looked forward to them and welcomed them at a distance [with the impetus their hope gave them], owning themselves no better than strangers and exiles on earth. Those who talk so make it clear enough, that they have not found their home. Did they regret the country they had left behind? If that were all, they could have found opportunities for going back to it. No, the country of their desires is a better, heavenly country. God does not disdain to take his title from such names as these; he has a city ready for them to dwell in' (11:13-16).

The patriarchal migrations come within the field of action proper to the promises. More than any other movement, they cannot be fully explained except in relation to a fixed centre of thrusts or impulses, which is none other than the God who made the promise to Abraham, a promise to which each one of the faithful is heir (6: 12-17). The conviction that this is so lies behind the forcible exhortation the sacred writer makes when he says: 'Our great longing is to see you all shewing the same eagerness right up to the end, looking forward to the fulfilment of your hope; listless no more, but followers of all those whose faith and patience are to bring them into possession of the good things promised them' (6: 11-2).

Through faith and hope the Christian takes his place in the caravan which has all the just of Israel for its members, and Abraham for its leader. The promises are still in force. Christ promulgated them anew, revealed their content in all its fulness, was the reality of what was only figure. There is still 'rest' to come at the end of the pilgrimage. But the land of Canaan

foreshadowed another land of promise, the heavenly Jerusalem, in which the faithful are to enjoy God's rest and taste God's own blessedness. It is all transposed on to the level of God's eternal rest and his infinite calm and bliss (4: 1-11).

Through being our high priest, Christ is the 'mediator of a nobler covenant, with nobler promises for its sanction' (8: 6). And his mediation accomplishes what it sets out to do. 'A death must follow . . . and then the destined heirs were to obtain, for ever, their promised inheritance' (9: 15). The believer will obtain this inheritance by 'sharing in Christ', the leader of the caravan and author of saving faith, which he alone can bring to its perfection in heaven. There can be no progress towards the Church which is in heaven without loyal trusting faith in the forerunner. This faith as it were sweeps us along.

It is indispensable, too, to belong in spirit to the caravan, to remain wholeheartedly united to the community of believers. No headway can be made outside the caravan. ' . . . Not abandoning, as some do, our common assembly, but encouraging one another; all the more, as you see the great day drawing nearer' (10: 25), on which Christ will solemnly reward the hopes that sustained us during the journey.

If the caravan is to move forward as a single whole, charity must keep our hearts and eyes wide open. 'Let us keep one another in mind, always ready with incitements to charity and to acts of piety' (10: 24). 'Your aim must be peace with all men, and that holiness without which no one will ever see God. Take good care that none of you is false to God's grace, that no poisonous shoot is allowed to spring up, and contaminate many of you by its influence' (12: 14-15). The crossing of the desert calls for health in the members of the caravan and a good understanding among them. Quarrels, infection or epidemics would inevitably hold up the advance. No one has the right to keep aloof from the others, to travel on his own.

Keeping apart from the others would be particularly dishonest and harmful in its attitude to the leaders (of the community). 'Do not forget those who have had charge of you and preached God's word to you [the foundation of our hope]; contemplate the happy issue of the life they led [i.e., no doubt, martyrdom, the supreme witness to hope], and imitate their faith. What Jesus Christ was yesterday, and is today, he remains for ever' (13: 7-8).

Anyone of the faithful can boldly cast all his hopes on Christ, who will never change or cease to exist, but no one can 'share in Christ' without help from the leaders of the community. 'Obey those who have charge of you, and yield to their will; they are keeping unwearied watch over your souls, because they know they will have an account to give. Make it a grateful task for them: it is your own loss if they find it a laborious effort' (13: 17). In the joy springing from hope, charity, reciprocal confidence and genuine obedience, the caravan humbly and bravely goes on with its emigration from provisional homelands to the ultimate one.

But faith and faithfulness will still have trials to face, God uses trials to teach with; they form part of the education he gives us. He promises us 'rest' and invites us to share his own beatitude, but he wants to see these advances responded to by real faithfulness. Because he wants this faithfulness to be pure and bright, he sends us trials. If faithfulness comes too easily, it is likely to be of indifferent quality.

The faithfulness the 'Father of a world of spirits' wants to educate his children up to is a brave exalted thing. His hand will be rough at times, and those who escape it must be considered as bastards, not as legitimate children, dear to their Father. 'Take your standards from [Jesus], from his endurance, from the enmity the wicked bore him, and you will not grow faint, you will not find your souls unmanned. Your protest, your battle against sin, has not yet called for bloodshed [unlike the protest of your leader, the author of your faith and your guide in the life of faith]; yet you have lost sight already of those words of comfort in which God addresses you as his sons. My son, do not undervalue the correction which the Lord sends thee, do not be unmanned when he reproves thy faults. It is where he loves that he bestows correction; there is no recognition for any child of his, without chastisement.

'Be patient, then, while correction lasts; God is treating you as his children. Was there ever a son whom his father did not correct? No, correction is the common lot of all; you must be bastards, not true sons, if you are left without it. We have known what it was to accept correction from earthly fathers, and with reverence; shall we not submit, far more willingly, to the Father of a world of spirits, and draw life from him? They, after all,

corrected us only for a short while, at their own caprice; he does it for our good, to give us a share in that holiness which is his. For the time being, all correction is painful rather than pleasant, but afterwards when it has done its work of discipline, it yields a harvest of good dispositions, to our great peace. Come, then, stiffen the sinews of drooping hand and flagging knee, and plant your footprints in a straight track, so that the man who goes lame may not stumble out of the path, but regain strength instead' (12: 3-12).

The whole of this passage is shot through with the spirit of fortitude. We must strive to assimilate the lesson of intrepidity which it teaches. The example of the leader stands out in the foreground. Prolonged consideration of it will enable the faithful to work up courage and determine to make the kind of resistance that 'calls for bloodshed' themselves if they have to. Trials are a merciful correction. They show that God is treating us as his children and that he wants to make us perfect in holiness.

Those escaping trials should not think the better of themselves for it. They are nothing more than bastards, sons who have forfeited the honour of sonship because they lack the trust, submissiveness and love that sons should have towards their father. Thus they are not wholeheartedly with the caravan in its journey towards rest and perfection. Correction is bitter at the time, it casts a gloom; but it sows with a view to a 'harvest of good dispositions, to our great peace', though this harvest will not ripen as if by magic. The humility of this remark emphasizes the human quality of it. It is also a caution against 'stylizing' the spiritual life.

The most painful trials are those administered to the 'inner man'. They can be reduced to the difficulty we feel in clinging to the invisible, to what is not perceptible to the senses and cannot directly concern them. The faithful have to go beyond the things that are most sought after on this earth and not to take the solicitations and witcheries of this world of ours as a rule for their desires and conduct. Faith uproots us from the humus of our earthly paradises and transplants us into God's world.

Moses is set before us as a model of the kind of faith which requires that life should be lived on a different plane from the one where human cupidity operates. 'Moses shewed faith, when he grew up, by refusing to pass for the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He preferred ill-usage, shared with the people of God, to the brief



enjoyment of sinful pleasures; all the wealth of Egypt could not so enrich him as the despised lot of God's anointed [i.e. Israel which God had chosen and consecrated for himself]; he had eyes, you see, for nothing but the promised reward. It was in faith that he left Egypt behind, defying the royal anger, made strong as if by the very sight of him who is invisible' (II: 24-7).

The behaviour of Moses is a magnificent illustration of the definition of faith given at the beginning of the chapter: faith is 'that which gives substance to our hopes [or guarantees them], which convinces us of things we cannot see'.

Faith looks to the future, it has no triumphs to promise us in this world. Faith has no attachment save to 'him who is invisible' (II: 27), and to the invisible gifts he bequeaths (the realities we cannot see) (II: 1). This famous verse stresses both the security the faithful have, because they already possess the first fruits of the good things promised, even though they cannot see them, and the firmness of their conviction. The faithful have begun to share in the riches of the world to come. They have 'received, once for all, their enlightenment, tasted the heavenly gift [the life of God in us], partaken of the Holy Spirit, known too, God's word of comfort, and the powers that belong to a future life' (6: 4-5).

The epistle reminds us of the hagiography of the Old Testament in order to show us what a source of patience, endurance and fearlessness is provided by this cleaving to things we cannot see, this certainty about the future. The examples set before us are a stimulant against fear of setbacks, contradiction or persecution. The spirit in which the author of the epistle reads the Old Testament justifies us in translating verse 26 of chapter II, quoted above, with direct reference to Christ himself: 'All the wealth of Egypt could not so enrich Moses as the despised lot of Christ'. If Israel, the Christ-people or anointed people of God, was a chosen people, it was because God wanted them to give birth to the Christ *par excellence*, Christ the Saviour. The history of Israel cannot be explained except with reference to Christ. It prefigures him. The passion is written in the trials this consecrated people underwent. Their trials call for the passion and foretell it at the same time. They have no religious virtue except through the passion. Thus by faith, which gives access to the whole of the divine plan and not to just a part of it, Moses suffers the despised lot of Christ. He suffers for Christ's cause. Whether they belong

to the Old Testament or to the New, all the just must share in the disgrace and ill-treatment Christ received; they must all accept a fragment of that acorn he met with, a thing covering all men in all ages like a cloak, at once a sign of derision and an instrument of salvation. The epistle to the Hebrews is superhuman in its foresight.

'When the high priest takes the blood of beasts with him into the sanctuary as an offering for sin, the bodies of those beasts have to be burned away from the camp; and thus it was that Jesus [in order to bring about the reality of which this ritual was the type], when he would sanctify the people through his own blood, suffered beyond the gate of the city [of Jerusalem]. Let us, too, go with him away from the camp [as though we were banished from our earthly cities], bearing the ignominy he bore; we have an everlasting city, but not here; our goal is the city that is one day to be' (I3: 11-4).

The real believers are those whom their hope will not leave in peace. It becomes evident that in the most sublime sense they are vagrants. To men bewitched by this world and its manifold seductions, they are an enigma.

The ignominy Christ suffered will fall on Christians, but Christ persecuted and suffering will always be their ideal. From him they will draw their strength and their power to persevere, and their merits will spring from his. In chapter 11, vv. 32ff., the epistle describes the persecutions the faithful have undergone, the tribulations they have been through, the way in which they have been robbed. They have borne it all with the joy and happiness that come from hope in Christ. 'When you were robbed of your goods you took it cheerfully, as men who knew that a higher, more lasting good was yours. Do not throw away that confidence of yours, with its rich hope of reward; you still need endurance, if you are to attain the prize God has promised to those who do his will.'

God's people tramp the roads of the world, never settling, nowhere taking root. Beneath all human conduct there is in fact the movement of the spirit in search of an 'approach to God'. If this people has been chosen, hallowed and consecrated, if God has made covenants with them for their good, the object is that they should make their way to a temple for religious purposes, repair to a holy place, and enter in.

The epistle judges and classifies the two covenants by the facilities they provide for approaching God and gaining access to his holy place. The people of Israel had been forbidden to approach Mount Sinai, the place where 'he who is' revealed himself, and even Moses trembled before him, for when this God who was not to be approached appeared, he was surrounded by a display of thunder, lightning and smoke to emphasize the brightness of his glory and the holiness and infinity of his majesty (12: 18). 'What the law contains is only the shadow of those blessings which were still to come [the messianic ones], not the full expression of their reality.' Those subject to the law 'can never reach, through the law, their full growth' (10: 1), i.e. they can never obtain by means of it the religious merit that would enable them to make an effectual 'approach to God'.

The privilege of approaching the 'city of the living God' (12: 22) falls to those for whose benefit the new covenant was made. Because Christ has purified them and broken the heavy bonds of sin, they can set out with the newly grouped community along the road leading to the holy of holies (cf. 9: 8), the holy place where God dwells and gives men beatitude.

Thanks to Christ the priest, the throne of God, which was an emblem of God's majesty and sovereign authority, has become a throne of grace, a source of kindness and mercy. Sinai is no more. Fear has been overcome. 'Let us come boldly then, before the throne of grace, to meet with mercy, and win that grace which will help us in our needs' (4: 16). The believer is no longer left alone with his own weakness and insufficiency. The help we need is always within our reach, provided that we 'come before the throne of grace' in trusting prayer.

The throne of grace should not be the only thing to attract us in the new sanctuary, heaven. There is a perpetual feast going on there too, an uninterrupted liturgical celebration, and we are urged to join in. All religious acts, all liturgical acts, especially when they are the expression of the community of the redeemed, are an echo of the joyous liturgy being celebrated in heaven eternally. There may be two states among God's people, some of us being still on the road with temptations and strife to go through, while others are already at rest in God; but for all that, in reality God's people is one people, forming with all its members one whole Christ. And our liturgy overlaps with the one that has

heaven for its sanctuary. It is penetrated through and through by this other liturgy; it receives its flawless beauty from it and its power to pass beyond the veil into a sanctuary not made by human hands.

'The scene of your approach now is mount Sion, is the heavenly Jerusalem, city of the living God; here are gathered thousands upon thousands of angels [like a crown of praise and rejoicing offered to God], here is the assembly of those first-born sons whose names are written in heaven [for Christians have the privileges of the first-born sons of Israel, with the right of inheriting God's blessings], here is God sitting in judgment on all men, here are the spirits of just men, now made perfect; here is Jesus, the spokesman of the new covenant, and the sprinkling of his blood, which has better things to say than Abel's had' (12: 24).

The teaching of the epistle, then, sheds considerable light on piety and the liturgy, and from it flows the obligation of avoiding the slightest negligence in anything to do with the worship of God. Our liturgy must be worthy of a hearing in heaven, and the notes it brings to the festal assembly of the just who form the Church in heaven must be clear and in tune.

The Church in heaven lives in the faith and piety of the Church militant, is at the heart of its hope, gives warmth to its love and liturgy. Thus the Church militant is a figure and sacrament of the Church glorified, which gives life to the Church militant through the contact there is between them. 'The kingdom we have inherited is one which cannot be shaken; . . . let us worship God as he would have us worship him.' (12: 28.)

In spite of its trials, the caravan hastens joyfully towards the eternal feast. Hope keeps the heart brave and is a protection against torpor and exhaustion. If too many Christians suffer from a deficiency of joy and therefore greedily pounce on pleasures whenever they can, as if they were pagans like their neighbours, the reason surely is that their hope is too weak.