

GOOD FRIDAY, 1950



T was dark. Looking up from the floor towards the window I could feel, rather than see, the dawn breaking. But to try to sleep now was useless, even though the old priest in the next cell had at last become quiet. All night long his groans had sounded through the wall between us, getting more like a mad nightmare as the night wore on and as their echo rang up from the floor on to my ears and nerves. Old priests and old nuns left lonely in their cells during years of trial; it is not often that one has the grace of being so close to them, so I had asked God to let me share the old priest's pain; and the night had been long. The darkness lay heavy upon me, shutting me in upon my own emptiness. Out of habit my mind twisted to escape from the emptiness, searching for the light shining in eyes which I loved, only to fall back upon itself, sinking into emptiness once more. No explanation was needed; today was the death of God; the day when the light of God's countenance revealed my sins, the sight of which caused Christ so much suffering that he had to shut his eyes. Today I should not look into the eyes I was searching for, since there was darkness over the earth. I closed my own eyes, for there was no light.

On each of my members Lent had left its mark: on my feet the mark of hard roads, in my head the ache of sleepless nights, whilst days of hunger were making my stomach squirm towards my backbone in search of food. If only I could fill myself with bread! Not until these last few days had I known that kind of hunger which possesses you so completely that every part of your body begins to ache, as though even your toes and eyes could eat if given the chance. I had learnt the difference between going hungry and fasting: that fasting is something which we organise, an experience which we can control with our minds and subdue it; when we are fasting under obedience we always know at the back of our minds that we *shall* eat at a certain hour in the future—if Lent occupies the foreground we comfort ourselves with the thought of Easter, and the surrender is not complete. Going hungry, as

beggars go hungry, is entirely different; they do not know when they will eat next; they cannot organise their experience, because hunger becomes the 'mastering-me God', the God who strikes relentlessly from moment to moment until the soul cries 'then lull, then leave off'. Trying to learn what hunger means to a beggar by fasting has little more chance of success than trying to share the lot of the miserable worker by living for six months in the slums. The secret of the beggar's suffering, as of the worker's suffering, is that it cannot be given any form; the mind cannot fix itself round it to give it shape and significance; hunger and misery invade their persons like great waves pouring into every nook and cranny of their being, flooding their every member until the waters cover their souls. And there is no end to it, only the hardly, barely prayable prayer that seems to be no prayer at all.

Bread is the first thing. And it is a measure of our failure as Christians that we have forgotten first things, that we imagine ourselves living on a higher plane. But bread is also the last thing in this life, at any rate for those of us who love God. At the highest moment of our spiritual life, in the ecstasy of communion, we eat consecrated bread, and, like the Apostles, we know Jesus Christ in the breaking of bread. Even the ancient Egyptians realised that no one would be justified after death unless they could say, 'I never allowed anyone to suffer hunger'; but many of us Christians have fallen below the level of Egyptian religion. It was with admiration, and not with horror, that a friend once told me of a priest so detached from creatures, so wholly given to God, that he would give alms to beggars with the words, 'I am not giving you this, my man, out of pity for you, but simply for love of God'. Did any words ever approach those words for sheer arrogance? As if he had ever seen God, he who had been created out of nothingness. As if any one of all the millions of persons on this earth, even the most holy of them, had ever seen God, or even knew anything about God except what God himself teaches us when he gives us bread and beggars and misery.

How little I had known of all this until the last few days, when I had wandered past brightly lit cafés in which people were eating, eating food, real food, not the imaginary food

with which my mind had tried to satisfy my stomach's cravings. It was food that I could have reached out for and touched, substantial, not imaginary—food that would fill. After some time I could scarcely notice anything else. One day I was very kindly shown around a religious house, admiring the paintings and the architecture, wandering through the library and the lecture-rooms, but the only room which came to life was the refectory. Once we were inside, my guide's words began to sound like echoes from a remote world, slurring off into irrelevance in face of what I could see lying on the refectory table. It was bread. My attention concentrated itself on one lump which was, perhaps, bigger than the others. Soon it began to grow even bigger, the voice beside me began to grow less and less until, for a moment, the refectory contained only two things—me, hungry, and that enormous lump of bread. Then the voice began to register once more, everything in the refectory fell back into place, knives, glasses and plates, all of them called into existence again. A few minutes later I was standing in the bright sunshine of the street.

There are two classes of human beings—those who eat and those who do not eat. It was early one morning that this division asserted itself in my mind, whilst I was kneeling in front of the Blessed Sacrament making my preparation for Mass. Kneeling next to me was the priest who was to offer the Sacrifice. Last night he had eaten; I had not eaten; and the joyless visage of Karl Marx came before my eyes when the priest a few minutes later began the offering. *Introibo ad altare Dei*. Marx certainly had got hold of something, even if he had twisted it. *Confiteor Deo omnipotenti* . . . it was the priest's confession, and he was confessing to me. From the depths of my soul I forgave him, and then it was my turn. *Confiteor* . . . I confessed to the priest and he forgave me, so that now we were both clean. We had been washed by Christ, the same washing with which he had washed the feet of his disciples before sharing together the Paschal feast; the priest and I were now to share the very same feast. Within a few minutes, within the space of time between the Annunciation and the Ascension, I had become one of those who eat, for the priest had given me bread, and he was one with me

in the breaking of bread. There are two classes of human beings—those who eat and those who do not eat.

But Holy Thursday was yesterday, and each minute of today was Good Friday. The past had gone; there was no future but only the eternal present, the emptiness inside me and the emptiness of the long cold corridors down which I walked to the church. The church also was empty, the high roof and the long nave a vacant shell. Whether there were people inside the church I could not say, because it would still have been empty though there had been thousands thronging into it. God was not present in the tabernacle. God was not with his people; we had driven away his Son, so that there was no dwelling-place for him. God was not present. The dreadful truth remorselessly seized me, like a paralysis binding one part of me after another, winding itself first round my heart and then my arms, running down to my feet, and numbing my brain until I felt like choking. Desperately my mind tried to twist itself away from the Truth, away from the darkness towards some imaginary light, refusing to be pinned down with the Truth. It was useless trying to move, I thought, for wherever I moved I should still not find God. Then I remembered the Altar of Repose and looked across the church towards the quiet figures kneeling before the altar. They had found God in that corner, in that piece of bread, where I could also find him. I had started to rise from my knees when a hand gripped me and pushed me back again to the floor, where I knelt motionless. Now my mind was twisting less desperately, slowly being pinned down to the Truth with Truth, just lying there without struggling. Today I could not find God. But perhaps if I lay still in the darkness where he had left me, God could find me. A quick impulse of hope ran through me as I saw the priests come out and approach the altar, remembering how the Passion itself in earlier years had brought comfort enough for a lifetime. *Hodie mecum eris in paradiso.* Those were the words my mind had been searching for. I had first seen them under a picture of Christ crucified, years ago; a bomb had landed, and that picture had been the first thing I saw when I pulled myself out of the corner where I had been thrown. *Hodie mecum eris in paradiso.* Those were the words I would cling to. I would be Dismas. That's right. I would

be the penitent thief, and Christ would look at me with his own eyes. He would speak those words with his own lips, and I should live.

Patiently now I listened to the priests reading the Passion, the turning of the pages being the only other sound to be heard. Complete stillness had settled upon the congregation; complete solitude descended upon me, for there was not one person here whom I knew. But I waited for the words in patience, until I heard the priest's voice: *Stabant autem juxta Crucem*. Then I realised the folly of clinging to comforts, the faithlessness in trying to reach out for God's gifts, as though we did not trust him to give them to us. What our Holy Mother the Church reads out to us on Good Friday is the Passion according to St John, in which there is no mention of Dismas and the promise he received, no mention of the words *Hodie mecum eris in paradiso*. To cast ourselves for the rôle of Dismas today is a mistake, at least, and probably much worse; it is presumption to cast ourselves for any rôle whatsoever, since in doing so we arrogate to ourselves an initiative which belongs to God. To choose any rôle for ourselves is to share in that sort of deceit which habitually speaks of 'the drama of the Cross', a deceit which persuades us to look towards the next scene, the scene of Easter, when we are meant to be suffering, really suffering, at the foot of the Cross. This is no play, but earnest.

Once more my mind stopped twisting and fell back into the darkness where there was no sign, no light from either heaven or earth. For an instant a loving hand touched me most tenderly at the words *Mulier, ecce filius tuus*, and then all that was left in the silence was an echo, the echo of those same words. Not satisfied with the echo, however, my careering brain refused to let the echo sound for itself and started to pursue it, only to drown the echo in my own movements. Again I had refused to sit still, I had drowned the message in my own restlessness and noise. But God would speak to me again if only I would listen. *Mulier, ecce filius tuus*: surely this was the truth that God was trying to pierce me with today. How he was to do so I could never imagine, since God's gifts are beyond imagination, and before we can receive them our minds must be still, set in the habit of silence and darkness.

I am a worm, and no man; like the worm, I wriggle in an effort to escape, but God in his mercy holds me still in order to pin me to the wood on which he has pinned himself; if he did not pierce my heart and my brain, these rebellious members of mine would drag me away from this wood of life, and I would die the death.

Was I at last beginning to learn something about suffering? I doubted it, somehow, when I thought of how easily we are deceived as soon as suffering becomes something we think about or meditate on, instead of something we just suffer. There is only one way to learn about suffering, and that is through suffering, not through reading about it. How many people imagine that they are learning about spiritual life or suffering when all that they are doing is reading the latest book on the subject? They imagine that they have come to savour suffering because the subject has become associated in their minds with the fresh smell of Sheed and Ward books and the restfulness of evening, or even with the mysterious sounds of *Tenebrae*. Anyone who pretends to love suffering is crazy. Suffering is something that just happens to you and that you would give almost anything to avoid. True enough, we are glad to suffer for someone we love, but only because we love them and because we think that this will shorten the beloved's suffering—not because we love suffering. If we have acquired a love for suffering on earth, then we can expect a long time in Purgatory—because there is no suffering in Heaven.

By the time I had reached this conclusion there was an unholy noise going on inside my head; my mind had lured me away from the wood of life, and I was no longer still. Moreover, I would *not* remain still any longer. Images of a different world than all this of suffering were now presenting themselves, not of a distant world either, but the one a hundred yards away: dusty roads shining in the sunlight with their streams of hikers and cyclists happy in their shirtsleeves and their freedom, laughing at the motorists who forced them into the edge of the road, chattering to each other in their joy at being free to go where they wished. They were not pinned down. The temptation to run out into the open air, to look at the blue skies and lose myself in the noise of this unthinking people, rose up inside me like the wind of a storm, driving me

off my balance until I had to grip the pew in front of me and hang on. After a few more seconds the temptation began to slacken, the storm had blown over, and a deep calm spread itself over the tense congregation and the stone pillars of the church. Motionless as those very pillars I waited for the next storm, no longer fearful this time because no longer trusting in my own strength. Until recently I might even have imagined that it was I who had overcome the temptation, for this kind of struggle raged inside me almost every day, and I might have believed that years of hanging on against the wind had strengthened my roots in their grip upon virtue. In fact, one single glance at the Cross had taught me that even though the fields shone green in the sun and the roads were bright with light, they would not have been shining for me. There was darkness over the face of the earth, darkness too thick for the rays of the sun or for any natural light. It was not so much that I had resisted the desire to escape to the roads and the warmth of life, but rather that they did not exist. Sometimes things cease to exist because they are not desired, and it was in the moment I glanced at the Cross that the sun, the roads and the fields were swept away.

Always after the storm of temptation we are left secure in some truth, the very same truth that has been sheltering us in spite of ourselves. This particular truth was all of a piece with the other truths that I had been learning during the past weeks, which were now knitting themselves together in me. Though, in fact, I had not 'learnt' these truths at all; they had been driven into me, slowly screwed into me as the dentist's drill presses into a tooth. One had come in through the pain in my feet, another through the gnawing in my stomach, and another through heartache, all pushing in through my body, occupying it, entering it so that they could be embodied.

Mastering me now was this one sure truth: each of us is in love with one person named Jesus Christ. It is all completely simple, the ultimate secret of everything that all human beings do at each moment of their lives. The reason why priests swing incense, why young people leave the freshness of fields and bury themselves in monasteries, the reason for everything, for solemn Holy Year ceremonies and the twisting

of beads round an old man's finger—we are all in love with a person named Jesus Christ. And he is dead. He is dead, because that is he stretched out on the Cross which the priests are carrying up to the altar.

Silently the congregation was filing out towards the altar rails, old women bending wrinkled heads over wrinkled hands, clear-skinned boys standing erect like soldiers on guard, kneeling in turn, shoulder to shoulder, waiting breathlessly for the one they loved. He came, carried on a Cross for them to kiss his feet. He was dead. How can he be dead? my mind protested against the darkness, trying to thrust upwards to the light, searching for consolation in the truths of faith, in the ready distinction between nature and person. But the truths were not working today; the Truth was nailed down on that Cross to which I was being dragged back, away from the mind's consoling operations, back to the stillness where the mind had stopped twisting. The question of whether he was God had become irrelevant by this time, just as pointless as in the moment years ago when I first believed; I had stood in an empty barrack-room gazing at the cross formed by the wooden supports, and slowly in the evening light I had said: 'I don't care whether you were just a human being, and not God. I don't care whether there is a life after death as you promise. Still I love you and will follow you, Jesus.' In that moment I had believed. But now all I knew was that I loved this human being; and he was dead. To have tried to leave the human level after this Lent would have meant betrayal. God's eyes had closed in pain, leaving us in darkness, abandoning us to hunger for bread; and we must hunger in our stomachs, in our hearts, and in our minds, empty of food and of human friends.

Moving from one end of the rails to the other the priests were working in unison, like navvies: the Cross, then the kiss and the flick of the cloth, backwards and forwards in front of the people. I knelt at the end of the rail as the Cross moved away from me, the Cross, then the kiss and the flick of the cloth. As the Cross came back there was nothing but the Cross in my line of vision; the priests had sunk from sight just as the voice of the priest in the refectory, days ago, had faded. Then I had been left gazing at bread; now I was left gazing at the body on the Cross. I was alone in the world with that

body. All movement in my mind had ceased. At last, after all these weeks of squirming and twisting, I was pierced to the spot where I was meant to be. And I recognised who it was they had laid upon the Cross, hearing voices from down the years telling me, hearing the keening of an old woman in the night. Her wail had sounded down the deserted street, like the cry of a stricken animal; it had come out of the fog, swept into the warmth of the fireside and wrapped itself round our hearts, turning them to ice. Startled eyes looked at one another, yet no one spoke; those with hearts remain silent when a mother loses her child. Very deliberately she moved round the kitchen, her hand fixing surely on anything she wanted—the soap, the towel, the clean white shirt; it was as though the rest of the world had ceased to exist, leaving her alone with him, talking to him. ‘I brought you into the world, son, and I’ll see you out of it. I was with you at the beginning and I’m going to be with you at the end.’

The Cross, then the kiss and the flick of the cloth; it had passed, and I was treading deliberately down the altar steps, my lips still shaped for the kiss I had given. Over the earth lay thick darkness; out of it sounded a voice, *Mulier, ecce filius tuus*, and I knew where I had been standing on Good Friday.