

HE THAT IS TO COME

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The Word was made Flesh and dwelt amongst us

NOWHERE are we told more clearly and briefly of the manner of Christ's presence amongst us than in the introduction to St John's gospel. He is made Flesh; that is to say he is one who comes. In the first instance it is he who comes to us. Secondly he is the light that is the life of men, but a light that shines in darkness. Thirdly he must be awaited and received by us. And fourthly those who receive him find that they have the power to see the light shining in the darkness. 'And we saw his glory, the glory as it were of the only-begotten of the Father full of grace and truth.' (John I. 14).

The Jews were remarkable in that they were looking to the future. Not for them only to rest content with the great favours that God had shown them in the past; the greatest favour was to come, in the person of the Prophet, the Messias, the holy one of God. Through all those thousands of years, they had learned well the lesson of waiting. If they faltered, the chosen people of God never gave up expecting. Their long wait was finally rewarded. The Word was made Flesh. But that does not mean that the waiting is over. The long wait of the Jews is symbolic of the continued waiting of the Church. The first condition of Christ's presence within us is that we wait for him.

But it is necessary not only to wait, but to know whom we are waiting for. The Jews to whom our Lord spoke were for the most part like people looking up, waiting for the heavens to open and reveal the chosen one of God, glorious in power and majesty. But in effect, our Lord said to them: Do not look up; look down. The kingdom of heaven is like to a mustard seed, which is the least of all the seeds. The kingdom of heaven has already come and the violent take it by storm.

The Word who from the beginning was with God, and was God, the Word in whom all things are made, is a light that shines in darkness. The Jews were waiting for the Word, but they were waiting for one who would shine in brightness. Even the chosen

apostles came only slowly to a recognition of that. 'And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, James and John, and leadeth them up into a high mountain apart by themselves, and was transfigured before them. And his garments became shining and exceeding white as snow as no fuller on earth can make white.' They were struck with fear, but there seems to be a suggestion in St Peter's words at the transfiguration that they were witnessing the true manifestation of the Messiah. Our Lord, however, gently taught them otherwise. 'And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them not to tell any man what they had seen till the Son of Man be risen from the dead . . . as it is written of the Son of Man, that he must suffer many things and be despised.' (Mark 9. 11).

Peter, James and John were to be together again, the chosen witnesses of a special event: 'And they came to a farm called Gethsemani. And he saith to his disciples, Sit you here while I pray. And he taketh Peter and James and John with him and he began to fear and to be heavy.' (Mark 14.32). At the transfiguration they were overcome with fear. Here at the agony in the garden they were overcome with sleep, but that would not prevent them from witnessing our Lord in the depths of his agony. They had seen the Word in glory, the light shining in brightness; now they were to see him in his agony, the light shining in darkness. It is not difficult to see the pattern of these events. The first was to strengthen them for the second, and to teach them the nature of the true manifestation of the Word, to teach them what to look for, to teach them where to look. The evangelists record that as he led them down from the mount of the transfiguration he was confronted with an epileptic, whom he cured. The world into which the Word comes is his own, but it is, characteristically, a world of epilepsy, above all a world of sin, and not a world of garments white as snow. His face shining bright and the garments white as snow, he taught them, were an anticipation, something he must merit by ascending another hill. And it was to be on that other hill that the Son of Man would be revealed in his fullness, where the light would shine most fiercely, but was indeed to be a light shining in the darkness of human weakness, misery and pain; there is finally the darkness of sin: 'In his body, on the tree, he bore our iniquities.'

If the apostles came only slowly to a knowledge of how to wait

for Christ, and where to look, we must not assume that we can do so quickly and with ease. 'There hath stood in the midst of you one whom you know not.' The solemn words of John the Baptist are valid for all time. Even when we want to see the Word, the itch to look for a light shining in brightness is deep within us. It is the itch to see our Lord transfigured, while all the time the kingdom is round about us. It is beneath us. It is the ground on which we walk. He, the Word, is creator of heaven and earth; that is to say of the old creation and of the new. But he is embedded in his creation like the mustard seed, and his manifestation is a slow and gentle process, following the pattern of the processes of this world. Slow and gentle because he is meek and humble of heart, but in his meekness and humility he is a willing victim of the violence of this world, of its pain and misery.

'Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For seeing that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of our preaching to save them that believe. For both the Jews require signs and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews indeed a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness; but unto them that are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men' (1 Cor. 1.20). We want him to be manifest, bright and shining. We find in the Cross, which is the fullness of the Incarnation, either a piece of folly as did the Greeks, and we are moved to make of God a product of human cleverness and penetration, or we find it in some way a scandal, a stumbling block, because what we expect is a *sense* of the presence and of the light of God, or perhaps even some private revelation.

It was not God in the first place who wanted a language of pain and misery and death. That was our doing; it was we who made them a feature of living. But it is God who has turned graciously towards them. It is he who has entered into weakness and blessed death, while it is we who want to close our eyes to them.

Christ the Word of God is not overcome by weakness and death. . . . He triumphs through them. The Cross is the wisdom of God and the power of God. The dark world neither overcomes nor recognizes the light; he came unto his own and his own

received him not. But as many as received he gave them power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in his name. Christ overcame the world by assuming its weakness; we obtain the power to do likewise by our faith in him.

'There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He was not the light but was to give testimony of the light. That was the true light that enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world.' It is remarkable that of the sixteen verses that form the introduction to St John's gospel, the passage in which the evangelist gives in outline a complete picture of the Incarnation, five verses are devoted to John the Baptist. It is not difficult to see why. He is the symbol of how we must overcome the world by faith. He is not the light, but the witness to the light.

Human wisdom, the wisdom that the Greeks stand for, is the wisdom that finds its resources and power within itself. The light shines from within our own minds: *lumen intellectuale*. Good, and even holy as it is, it has never been sufficient to light up God, much less God-made-man. And it is not that it is a weak light that needs to be made stronger; a whole new technique of recognition must be learned, a new use of the mind. The man who sees, tells himself the story of truth; the believer listens to another telling the story of the ultimate mysteries that are not of this world: *Fides ex auditu*.

It is not the kind of knowledge that commends itself to the learned of this world. Belief is frequently identified with superstition: the Cross will always be folly to the Greeks. But unlike the wisdom of this world, this belief is of itself wholesome. It is saving. We can recognize the light shining in the darkness only in so far as we turn towards it. And we must turn our whole selves. A man can direct the native light of his mind, independently of the love, or hatred, in his heart. He can know the things that he hates. But the key to seeing the Word hidden in darkness is the initial desire to possess it, or rather to be possessed by it. 'Peace on earth to men of good will' was the message of the angels at the first Christmas. And it is good will that gives meaning to it. It is the good ground of the parable of the sower; that condition in ourselves which our Lord so clearly taught on that occasion as being the necessary condition in ourselves for the seed of the Word to take root.

In the gospels we see this faith in Christ slowly coming into

being. After a considerable period of patient and gentle teaching, he was by the lake with his disciples and he asked them, 'Whom do men say that I am?' And after they had given him an answer, he said, 'Whom do you say that I am?' And Simon Peter, answering for the rest, said, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.' (Matt. 16. 16.) This was not only the faith of Peter that was being born; it was our faith, the faith of the Church. We believe by sharing in the faith of the Church. The Church is before all else a believing body.

St Peter was to answer for the apostles on a later occasion, when our Lord's strong words about his own flesh and blood being the necessary food and drink for eternal life had driven away most of his hearers. And turning to them he asked, 'Will you also go away?' And Peter answered, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.' The increasing strength of Peter's faith can be measured when we consider that, in his discourse, our Lord had given no hint of the sacramental character of the eating and drinking.

Later still, our Lord was sitting round the table with them, and taking bread, he blessed it and broke it and distributed it to them saying, 'This is my Body.' The story of the faith of Peter, that is to say, the story of the faith of the Church, is nearing its end. All through, it is the story of the good will of Peter; Peter turning towards the light.

John the Baptist is the symbol of this turning of the whole self. 'Repent', he said, 'for the Kingdom of God is at hand.' And these words were spoken in the desert. We must go out into the desert; that is to say, we must leave behind all the familiar places, the known ways, the tracks that human nature beats out for itself. It means, above all, turning our backs on ourselves; it is the beginning of that self-sacrifice which is the very essence of the following of Christ. This is the good will, this is the good ground, the necessary condition for recognizing the Word made Flesh. Like the Jews, we must wait; but unlike them we wait for the light to shine in the darkness.

The Advent of Christ. During these days the gospels of the Mass contain much about John the Baptist. His is the spirit of advent. It is the spirit of abandonment, of a turning the whole self, not out of any contempt for human nature, but out of a sense of its weakness. Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

The two poles of Christ's presence within us are, on the one hand, the fullness of his redemptive power especially in his eucharistic sacrifice, and on the other the weakness of human nature.

Repent. In that classic act of contrition, the fiftieth psalm, David teaches us what repentance is. He is in the first instance concerned with his own immediate personal sin. 'Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy great mercy . . . wash me from my sin. Against thee only have I sinned.' He is concerned with himself, with his sin, and with God, who has been personally offended. But he passes to a wider view. 'Behold, I was conceived in iniquity, in sin did my mother conceive me.' Our own personal sins are nearest to us, but beyond that is the whole world of evil to which we belong, by nature. It has been overthrown by the establishment of the Kingdom, but we can only avail ourselves of that victory in the degree in which we turn towards the Kingdom. We can no longer rejoice in the innocence of Adam before the fall. He had a right to walk with pride in the presence of God. That has all been changed. The redemptive power of the Cross is not a power that makes strong human beings even stronger and more powerful. It works, not on our strength, but on our weakness. 'And lest the greatness of these revelations should exalt me, there was given me a sting of my flesh, an angel of Satan to buffet me. For which cause thrice I besought the Lord that it might depart from me; and he said to me; my grace is sufficient for thee, for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may dwell in me. For which cause I please myself in my infirmities, in reproaches, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ. For when I am weak, then am I powerful.' All this is implied in John the Baptist's 'Repent'. It implies wanting the saving Truth, but it also implies, in the sense which St Paul explains, turning from ourselves.

For the Kingdom of God is at hand. It is present about us. It is hidden in little things. First the little thing that is the death on the cross. Just one of the many millions of deaths. And those who were responsible for it tried to make it even smaller. 'Let us get him out of the way before there is any more fuss', was the theme of those events. And there was nothing to give it any dignity. The good thief saw that; his death was an act of justice. And now the fullness of that redemptive sacrifice is hidden within

the elements of the bread and wine. And stemming out from that all the circumstances of our lives are shot through with the presence of Christ.

There has stood in the midst of you one whom you know not. But there are simple conditions for knowing him. 'And to them that received him, he gave power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in his name, who are born, not of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.' The power does not come from our own nature, from our flesh, nor does it come from any other human being, but from God alone, from God made man. 'And of his fullness we have all received, grace for grace.'



VOCATIONS AND THEIR RECOGNITION—II

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IT has been seen in the previous article that there are three aspects under which we may approach the analysis of a vocation. Within the vocation itself there is the divine call and the ecclesiastical call. External to it, but as its necessary condition, there are the appropriate gifts and qualities in the recipient. We have seen that the divine call is a grace communicated to the soul. From the side of God we have seen that this grace is offered not as a matter of precept, but of counsel; to resist it, or rather to fail to receive it, is not necessarily sinful since its acceptance is left to our free, prudential choice; but this is not to say that it may not be sinful. For there are other sins than those of formal disobedience to a precept; there is the sin of rashness, against prudence. And failure to accept the grace offered may be just such a sin.

So far then, the grace has been considered as uncreated, in God; as that in him which we have called his *voluntas signi*, his 'will' signified to a man by some sign, in this case the counsels as they seem to a man to be bearing in upon his own life.

We have now to examine the grace as received in a man's soul, the created counterpart to God's favour. And the question already formulated in the previous article was how we may know its presence; how do we recognize a true vocation in this, its fundamental aspect?