

a time of deliverance because in this vast perspective it is so much easier to see one's individual problems in the right perspective. Loneliness, that widespread and typically individualistic disease, should no longer exist. One can only hope that Catholics at least will re-install the 'brother' where he belongs.

## Signs and Wonders

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'“If Christ rose from the dead, His religion and His doctrine are divine; but Christ rose again from the dead, therefore His religion and His doctrine are divine.” The first of these propositions is true; because, if Christ rose from the dead, it must have been by His own power, or by the power of God; if by His own power, by that very fact He would prove Himself God; if by the power of God, this would prove beyond doubt His divine mission . . . The second proposition, namely, but Christ rose again, only asserts one of the most certain historical facts . . . This miracle is the object of the attacks of all the incredulous, for this once admitted, no one could deny the divine mission and the Divinity of Jesus Christ. The Apostles, according to these, were either impostors or men labouring under hallucinations; but one or other of these hypotheses would be as extraordinary a miracle as could be conceived.' Thus a not untypical extract from a not untypical manual of theology<sup>1</sup> published in 1892 (the date is important: though preceding the revival in scriptural study and theology, it follows and tries to accommodate the *Constitutio de Fide* of the first Vatican Council). Thus, neatly packaged in propositions and challengingly labelled 'Credibility and truth of the Christian religion, knockdown demonstration of', an instant brew marketed as both stimulant to the unbeliever and sedative to the Christian.

But of course no unbeliever was ever taken in by this or any similar argument. The miracle is not that the 'incredulous', confronted with the Christian gospel transmuted into these apologetics, have still con-

<sup>1</sup>*The Creed Explained*; by A. Devine.

tinued in their unbelief; it is that the apologetics have survived so long, when their errors are less obvious only than their complete inability to convince. The objective is valid enough: to demonstrate the credibility of the Christian faith, and so to establish one necessary motive for an unbeliever to accept the Christian faith as true. But, because the demonstration is attempted by the bare assertion of a miracle seized from its context in salvation history and radically misinterpreted, the objective is hopelessly missed. In this article I want to suggest that the objective itself remains important, but that it can only be achieved if the gospel is preached from the context and in the terms in which it was revealed by God—proclaimed, that is, as the history of salvation enacted by God, recorded in the scriptures, and constantly made present again by the preaching Church.

This becomes clearer, I think, when the theological shortcomings of the 'traditionalist' apologetic with which I began are examined more closely. There are three serious theological misconceptions implicit in the argument, all of them due to the basic mistake of treating the resurrection of Christ as (simply) a miracle. First, the presentation of the resurrection as a demonstration of divine power, ignoring its true significance as the central event of salvation history, effectively obscures the essential rationality of God's raising of Christ and at the same time fails to show why this event is relevant to the human condition. The natural reaction of an unbeliever to such a presentation is to take no further interest; he has been given no cause to consider that he is personally involved. But if curiosity pushes him further he comes up against the second failure of the traditionalist argument—its failure to present the resurrection as credible, due to the fact that the historical and conceptual context which alone lends credibility to such an (at first sight) incredible event is blandly excluded. Told, out of context, that the resurrection is a 'most certain historical fact', the honest unbeliever could only reject the Christian religion as altogether incredible. And, even if, *per impossibile*, he could sincerely accept the Christian faith as credible on the strength of this presentation, he would still be lacking any criterion by which to judge it as true; for the third chief failure of the traditionalist apologetic is its failure to show that the resurrection of Christ is not a (theoretically) repeatable event, but a unique climax in a unique history—that, in other words, the resurrection is not an almost capricious act of God (which would repel acceptance of it as true), but an act of God so full of meaning that the meaning itself is a motive for acceptance of it as true.

All these shortcomings derive from the basic mistake of describing the

resurrection (or, for that matter, any other event of salvation history) as a 'miracle'. 'Miracle' is a philosophical term which, though having a limited technical application within the theological discourse of believers, is essentially inappropriate in the context of the Christian gospel. By this I do not just mean that 'miracle' is a misleading translation of the relevant words—'sign', 'wonder', 'work'—used by the biblical writers; I mean, too, that it actually obscures and distorts their real meaning. A proposition of the form 'The resurrection of Christ is a miracle' is analytic rather than synthetic; it provides no information about the resurrection, but merely exemplifies what is meant (within the terminology) by 'miracle'. The distinction between 'miraculous' and 'natural' events is a common one in Christian discourse, and it has often been applied to the events narrated in the scriptures. But the application is so much wasted effort. To call a marvellous event recorded in the Bible a 'miracle' is merely to say (what every believer already knows) that the omnipotent God can and does perform acts which are beyond the power of man; to call it, as do the biblical writers, a 'sign' (a marvellous sign, perhaps, but still a sign) is immediately to draw attention to the fact that some *meaning* has been revealed in it by God, and to direct the believer's energy towards discovering that divine meaning.

The conceptual framework of the biblical writers distinguishes, not between 'miraculous' and 'normal' or between 'natural' and 'supernatural', but between 'God' and 'man'—between, in this context, 'divine acts' (miraculous and otherwise) and 'human acts'. The implications of this profound difference between the native biblical distinction and the later philosophical distinction are far-reaching: not only are we led by the biblical writers to look at each so-called miracle as an individual act of God performed for a specific divine purpose within the whole history of salvation, rather than as just another exemplar of the category 'miracle' (just another demonstration of God's omnipotence); we are also led to see the presence and action of God in a whole train of events which (in that philosophical terminology) we would label as 'natural' or 'normal', and then promptly ignore. S. Mowinckel has described this aspect of the biblical conceptual framework very clearly: 'All of history is the miracle of God. The very acts that we consider 'natural' are wondrous deeds of God. The prophets made no distinction between certain happenings that were "natural" and "according to law" and others that appeared more fantastic and therefore must be God's interference with history. All is interference, and all has its natural side.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>*The Old Testament as Word of God* (Oxford, 1960), p. 36.

The biblical writers, then, do not call on us to look for particular 'miraculous' events that must demonstrate divine activity because they can be explained in no other way; they direct our attention to a whole sweep of events which demonstrate divine and divinely purposeful activity in history, and which together form a meaningful pattern. As Mowinckel again puts it, this time in describing the presuppositions of the Jahwist and Elohist authorship streams of the Pentateuch: 'To understand the plan of God is, for them [i.e., for the Jahwist and Elohist], to understand history as God's history'.<sup>3</sup> And this is to assert much more than either a mere Jewish (and Christian) philosophy of history, or a mere series of divine interventions into history; it is to assert that the whole history of the first covenant people, and now of the new covenant people, is a history of God's presence and constant activity among men.

And so the credibility and truth of the Christian faith must be presented to the unbeliever from the whole interweave of signs and wonders and works as recorded by the biblical writers, rather than from certain extrapolated 'purple passage' miraculous events—from the cumulative force of all the events of salvation history and of the interpretation imposed on them by the biblical writers, rather than the short-list of miracles which the traditionalist apologetic has preferred to present. This task, though certainly more likely to convey the faith to unbelievers, is also much larger and much more difficult. It is the superficial attraction of the traditionalist approach that propositions like 'the resurrection of Christ demonstrates the divine origin of the Christian religion' present for acceptance by the unbeliever a truth of the familiar and apparently simple type—a truth to be asserted and verified within a particular theological system, just as another truth might be asserted and verified within the terminology of a particular science. But the truths presented by the biblical writers are of a quite different type; they are, as Brian Wicker pointed out in a recent article in this journal,<sup>4</sup> truths more like the truths of the 'dramatic world' of a play or novel. This means that the Christian gospel is presented to its hearers in much the same way a play is presented to its audience; that the honest (but unbelieving) enquirer approaches the dramatic world of the Bible, of the preached Word of God, in much the same spirit as he would approach a new novel or play; that in fact he is confronted, not so much by the truth or truths of the gospel or of the play, as by the whole coherence

<sup>3</sup>*op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>*Theology and Disbelief*, in *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, October 1962.

and relevance of the dramatic world in question, and that he responds and accepts its 'truth' according to his own moral openness and according to the actual coherence and relevance of what is presented.

The position of the unbeliever before the dramatic world of the preached Word of God is well put by Fr Charles Davis: 'A message comes to us by preaching, it carries signs of its divine origin or authenticity, and the mind responds by faith when it acknowledges the word or testimony of God and thus accepts its truth. The mind is not confronted with the truth of the message but with the marks it bears of a divine communication'.<sup>5</sup> It is important to recognise these two distinct stages:<sup>6</sup> the first stage in which the unbeliever is confronted, in the Christian proclamation, with a message which bears the marks of its divine origin; and the second stage in which, though not by inference, he judges that these marks proclaimed as divine are indeed divine, and so naturally comes to acknowledge the content of the message as true because guaranteed by God who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Both these stages are paralleled in the normal confrontation with a literary dramatic world, though with a vital difference: as the new audience of a play we are first confronted with the authority of the writer as made apparent in his work, and then—if, from the evidence of his work, we accord him the authority of an important artist—we judge the play as a whole as true and relevant and are changed accordingly; but we always accord the writer merely human authority, and so always reserve the right to postpone, qualify, or even withhold our assent in the particular case.

Thus an honest but (so far) unbelieving enquirer might approach his first production of *Hamlet* or his first hearing of the Christian gospel in the same way. He would believe that Shakespeare had something of importance and relevance to say (because the players think it worth playing; because many people whose opinions he respects think it has enlarged their view of the world and of the human character; and so

<sup>5</sup>From the essay *With or Without Faith?*, republished in *The Study of Theology* (London, 1962), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup>It is on this point that I differ from Mr Wicker, whose extremely illuminating approach I have followed closely in other respects. As I understand him, in the article cited Mr Wicker seems to argue that Christian faith follows logically from an understanding of the dramatic world of the scriptures; that, in other words, contrary to Christian tradition and to the explicit words of the first Vatican Council *Constitutio de Fide* (Denzinger 3008, 3010, 3035), faith can somehow be *inferred* from the internal coherence of revealed truth which is in fact only a powerful motive to faith.

on); and he would believe that the gospel had something of importance and relevance to say on similar grounds. In both cases, however, he would expect the dramatic presentation to carry its own conviction; normally speaking, he would respond to each presentation to the limits of his moral awareness, accepting as credible and relevant both Shakespeare's characterisation of Hamlet and the gospel message, but it is always possible—due either to a (not necessarily culpable) lack of moral awareness of his own, or due to a failure in the presentation—that he would not respond on the particular occasion. There is no logically necessary response in either situation; all we can say is that, in either situation, the natural response of the honest enquirer to a live presentation would be acceptance of its credibility and relevance.

But the important point comes where the parallelism between the two situations ceases. By responding to the dramatic presentation of *Hamlet* to the limits of his ability, the enquirer has already implicitly placed a faith in Shakespeare as far as he can ever place faith in a man, because he will tend to estimate Shakespeare's authority in proportion to the felt enlightenment he has received. But a similar response to the dramatic presentation of the gospel, to the living Word of God, falls far short of faith in God in the required sense, because it is still faith in the human authority of the biblical writers rather than in the God who has revealed himself through them. There are, I think, many honest unbelievers who hold precisely this human faith in the human authority of large portions of the Christian gospel: they recognise in it, as they recognise in Shakespeare, a high degree of insight into the human condition and character, a powerful and enlightening literary imagination (at least in the psalms and the prophets), a true morality (at least in the gospels); but, so long as they place faith in an authority still seen as merely human, they always reserve the right to withhold assent in the particular difficult case, and so fail to place the required unconditional faith in the divine authority which guarantees the whole gospel. The Word of God demands complete and unreserved acceptance; mere acceptance of the credibility, and even in large part of the truth, of the word *about* God falls short of this.

In other words, the Word of God is a special case among dramatic worlds. As Fr Davis said, it carries with it signs of its divine origin, and these signs must be proclaimed as uniquely demanding and uniquely able to command faith in that divine origin. The traditionalist presentation of the Christian message as essentially a gratuitous demonstration of divine power carries no such signs, as we saw earlier; but it still

remains to show how a more scriptural presentation does carry signs of divine origin and authenticity.

Let me take as a starting point one of the earliest recorded proclamations of the Christian gospel (1 Cor. 15. 3 ff.), in which St Paul says this: 'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised again on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive . . .' Three elements in this proclamation are important. First, St Paul makes it clear that the message is one of salvation—that Christ died for our sins, and was raised again. Secondly, the saving events proclaimed are proclaimed as 'in accordance with the scriptures', that is, as meaningful events to be understood and interpreted in the light of earlier recorded divine events. And thirdly, Christ's appearance after his resurrection was witnessed—this, the most incredible of the events proclaimed, is asserted and justified as historical.

What is proclaimed is proclaimed as unique, real, and relevant to all men. There is no bare assertion of these crucial divine events out of context: their historicity vindicated, they are at once related to the other divine events recorded in the story of God's presence among his people and so placed within the overall divine plan. The hearer is not asked to believe on the strength of these events alone, but on the strength of these events interpreted in the light of many other events. He is not asked to believe in events somehow 'accidentally' inserted at a particular point in history, but in a whole history proclaimed as God's history—not merely in a Christian philosophy of history, but also in God's constant and plainly evidenced presence in history. He is not expected to interest himself in divine events simply interpolated on the historical situation as some cold demonstration of divine power, but is shown that he is himself inextricably involved in these events. And, lastly, he is not required to accept as credible what are (at first sight) most incredible events, but is shown a whole sequence of events whose inner coherence and ever clearer purpose alone provide the grounds on which any or all of them may be seen as credible.

This pattern of progressive revelation showing more and more God's saving purpose, and firmly rested in actual historical events, is repeated in many subtle and interlinking ways throughout the scriptures; but it occurs most notably, and most obviously, between the events of the Old Testament and the events of the New, between symbolic events

uniquely adapted to showing the divine purpose and new events which not only revive the symbolism, but make it real. Let me give one example. Certain Old Testament theologians, in particular the Pentateuchal P-stream and the Wisdom writers, came to a view of their God as essentially the God who had created the world and his own chosen people and had revealed his purpose to that people, and they expressed this theology in terms of a creative word or wisdom of God. Thus the first chapter of Genesis records God creating the world by his words: 'And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light' (Gen. 1. 3); and Proverbs personifies the wisdom of God and makes her say: 'The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago was I set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth' (Prov. 8. 22). Already God's creative, purposeful, and self-revealing action is profoundly understood and presented. But in the New Testament St John takes this developed theology and reinterprets it in the light of the new divine events, not merely reviving the old symbolism to give greater clarity but establishing it as actualised—as living, real symbolism, as sacramental in the distinctively Christian sense. For (Jn. 1. 1-3 and 14) 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' And we are suddenly made aware of a unique and uniquely powerful claim: Christ is not merely the vehicle of God's creative and revealing activity, but is that activity made real and human. We are confronted, not merely by a coherent theology of history, but by a history in which God is himself present.

There are, I think, two elements to be emphasised in this sacramental view of history. First, no single human author or group of authors is responsible for more than a part of the historical and theological presentation, or for more than a part of the divine symbolism portrayed; Old Testament theologians have already completed each particular nexus of themes before later Old Testament theologians, and above all New Testament theologians, reinterpret those themes to give them even fuller and richer meaning. Thus the overall meaning, if accepted, must be accepted as more than human. Secondly, the New Testament, in many different but inter-related ways, portrays the Christ-event, not just as another event symbolising divine activity in history and expressing the faith of the writer and his community in God, but as an event which both continues to symbolise and effects what it symbolises. Every

important Old Testament theme, every important Jewish religious custom and belief, is consummated and realised in the person as well as the words of Christ.

But however rich and unique this coherence of theological understanding and history, however powerfully it presents itself as credible to the unbeliever, it does not compel faith. Faith is the natural, typical response of the honest enquirer; but it is not a logical inference. Part of this has been clearly put by Père Yves Congar: 'Jesus offered men signs, generally parables and miracles, but also himself in his own person. Under those signs the Kingdom of Heaven was brought close, and opportunity was given to recognise and accept that approach—or to refuse it . . . According to the way the man reacts to the sign he has encountered, so an attitude begins to take shape within him; either one of good will and welcome which, God helping, will lead to faith, or one of ill will and refusal, which will lead to a stubborn turning-away from God's invitations—such a one "will be unbelieving still, though one should rise from the dead" (Luke 16. 31.)' For faith not only must there be good will in the enquirer, but the sacramental signs which bear the marks of their divine origin must be understood as such, accepted as credible, and then believed—unconditionally—as true for that reason.

There are more obstacles to faith than sin and ill will. Even the honest enquirer must hear the gospel proclaimed with its sacramental marks of unique—because divine—origin, which entails that he must be confronted with it as the drama of saving history complete with its own inner logic rather than as a series of isolated miraculous events; and he must be capable of understanding the proclamation in those terms and responding to it, which entails that we must allow him the opportunity of responding, not on this occasion, but on a later one (none of us always succeeds in responding to a play or novel at first acquaintance). If he does respond, he is equipped with the one vital human motive to faith—experience of the essential credibility of its content, and its relevance to him because concerned with his own salvation and because revealing to him his own purpose and future field of action. But faith is the free gift of God; and, though God never withholds the gift from the sincere enquirer, he is no more bound to grant it *now* rather than later than the enquirer is himself bound to believe *now* rather than later. And, I repeat, the honest enquirer is never *logically* bound to believe at all, for faith does not follow *logically* from acceptance of the gospel message as credible; all we can say is that the honest enquirer, though probably

<sup>7</sup>Laity, *Church and World* (London, 1960), p. 77.

inculpable on any particular occasion when his understanding of the gospel did not result in faith, would certainly become culpable if a lifetime's exposure to the true gospel did not result in faith.

I have emphasised this point because I think it an important practical advantage of the scriptural over the traditionalist presentation of the gospel message that it allows us a more plausible and more charitable account of the typical unbeliever's situation. We are never bound to impute to him culpable ill will (even though this might sometimes be the case); we are simply bound to preach the gospel to him, to make the dramatic presentation of the Christian message which will lead him to see it (at the time of his own choosing, or rather God's) as credible and relevant, and finally as true. And, I have suggested, this kind of presentation requires that we preach the whole interweave of themes and symbols, sacramentally realised, which the scriptures record, rather than any apologetic of isolated and misinterpreted miracles. Let me finish by showing that this view is compatible with the important first Vatican Council decrees on faith, since the traditionalist view which I feel it can and should supersede sometimes justifies itself from those decrees.

The relevant canons are 3 and 4 of chapter 4 *de Fide*: 'If any man says that divine revelation cannot be made credible by external signs, and so that men ought to be moved to faith only by their own internal experience or private revelation: let him be anathema. If any man says that miracles cannot happen, and therefore that all accounts of them, including those contained in holy scripture, must be rejected as mere fables or myths; or that miracles can never be recognised as such for certain, and that the divine origin of the Christian religion is not appropriately shown by them: let him be anathema'.<sup>8</sup> On the view I propose it is, of course, important to maintain that divine revelation is made credible by external signs; that, indeed, is the whole burden. But, though I think we must reject the idea that miracles *qua* miracles have power of themselves to render revelation credible, there is no need to deny that miracles can happen or have happened. It is merely a matter of qualifying the converse propositions, when asserted, so that they are understood in context: that is, so that miracles are understood as the appropriate motives for the credibility of the Christian gospel, not in virtue of the fact that they are miracles (as opposed to 'natural' events), but in virtue of the fact that each individual miracle is a divinely appointed sign of the divine saving purpose; and so that miracles are

<sup>8</sup>Denzinger 3033 and 3034. My translation.

understood as having this force, not exclusively (for other 'natural' events have it too) or in isolation (for it is precisely by having a place in the overall divine plan that they have the power at all), but together with other 'natural' events as an interlinking nexus which as a whole bears the marks of divine origin.

The corresponding prefatory chapter *De Fide* of the Constitution provides reason to suppose that this interpretation is not an intolerable twisting of the intended sense of the canons. '... God willed that, to the internal assistance of the Holy Spirit, should be joined external evidences of his revelation, namely *divine acts*, and principally miracles and prophecies, which, since they *combine to show* in a rich manner God's omnipotence and infinite knowledge, are most certain *signs* of divine revelation and appropriate to every man's understanding'.<sup>9</sup> This commentary by no means supports the traditionalist apologetic. Though (as was natural at the time) it lays heavy emphasis on 'miracles and prophecies', it does, I think, provide important support for the view that divine acts as a whole and in combination with each other form the external evidences of God's revelation; and, by its insistence on the appropriateness of these divine acts as signs for men of all levels of understanding, positively encourages a 'dramatic world' presentation of the gospel rather than the traditionalist assertion of propositions. Philosophy and traditionalist theology are beyond the intelligence or the inclination of many people. Only a dramatic world like the dramatic world of scripture and of the preached Word is open to the understanding and response of everyone.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, we are not required to try and prise men from their unbelief by asserting propositions about miracles, but simply to present and proclaim to them the whole of our faith as relevant, unique, real, and credible. The rest—for which we may be thankful—is up to God, and to the unbelievers.

<sup>9</sup>Denzinger 3009. My translation and italics.

<sup>10</sup>cf *Culture and Liturgy* (London, 1963); by Brian Wicker. In this exciting and stimulating book Mr Wicker admirably argues the need for Christian commitment to the idea of a common culture, and shows how the gospel, ever made present in the liturgy of the community of the faithful, is thereby essentially manifested by *all* the faithful to *all* unbelievers.