

GOOD FRIDAY¹

PAUL FOSTER, O.P.

AT this period of the year, as the earth swings in its orbit from aphelion to perihelion and brings the tree to bud and leaf again, Holy Church, by some ancient sortilege of Epacts and Indictions, Concurrences and Golden Numbers, fixes in that orbit a point that shall be Easter Day. Thereby she also fixes the days that immediately precede Easter. So nature and supernature, the universe and the universal Church, confront us year by year on Good Friday with that leafless and essential tree, the Cross.

Let us, today, go back to the first Good Friday, and take our stand where the Cross is to be erected. We are just outside the gates of Jerusalem, on the refuse-dump, the place of execution where the city eliminates its most hateful objects, the men whom it can no longer stomach within it. Look down from the little hill upon the great city. There it lies in all its magnificence, 'the joy of the whole earth', for there the tribes of Israel go up to give testimony to their faith. Century on century of snow and sun have matured it; the surrounding civilisations have enriched it, Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek. Poetry and prophecy, law and learning, priest and professor are its glory, 'his own dwelling among the inviolate hills, the Lord loves Sion's walls better than any other home in Jacob'. True, there is an army of occupation, but it is no ignoble yoke. The very heart of that ancient culture still stands, the Holy of Holies; once a year the High Priest will enter in to consummate that worship of the one true God which is the very signature of Israel. You can still look upon a Jerusalem today, my brethren, but it is not the city over which Christ hung, over which Christ wept. That city lies yards deep beneath the foundations of today, as if it had been ground to rubble by some horrible explosion. Annas and Caiphas are lost causes indeed; the creed of the Pharisees and Sadducees a forsaken belief. But the Cross, the instrument of elimination, still stands.

Out from the city gates we see a small company advance towards the place of execution. The rabble accompanies it as

1 A Sermon preached on Good Friday, 1951, at Blackfriars, Oxford.

usual, a few sympathisers, mostly women, follow closely behind, and in the midst of the steel-clad detachment of occupation troops is the prisoner, the criminal. He is already in the last stages of exhaustion, having undergone all that procedure of 'conditioning' that we have seen so often in these recent years. He has been sold by one of his trusted apostles for a song, and publicly disowned by the prince of them. He has been dragged from one mockery of a law-court to another, from Annas to Caiphas, Caiphas to Pilate, Pilate to Herod and back to Pilate again. He has endured the night-long interrogation, the merciless beatings and cross-questionings, the perjured testimonies. He has been knocked about like a bullied schoolboy or a tortured cardinal. And now they are going to finish off the business; they are leading him to the place of execution.

What do we know of this criminal against whom the savage hatred of an ancient culture has been unloosed? For three years now he has been going about the roads of Palestine, revealing to men a personality so enchanting that they have felt in their hearts that, at last, the eternal spring had come to visit the iron-bound winter of the world. He has spoken to them by lake-side and in the market-place and on misty mountain slopes, and proclaimed a law of self-sacrificing loving being the rule for men, because such love is the very nature of God; the splendour of his personality and doctrine, the awe-inspiring information that God is a God of fantastic love and generosity, he has backed up by evidence that he spoke with sovereign authority as God himself. For he has done what only God could do, by showing authority over disease, devils and death. And this, not by an appeal to another and mightier power, but on his own word alone. 'I will, be thou clean', he has said even to lepers; 'Come out of him', he has said to the devils; and finally, in the most astounding revelation of all, he has surmounted death itself. 'Lazarus, come forth', and there, before the appalled bystanders, stood Lazarus, four days already in the tomb, alive with the winding sheets still about him. He has made his position explicit: who acts as God, is God. 'Before Abraham was made, I AM.'

And that, of course, was the unpardonable offence, for if he were God, then what the Scribes and Pharisees were teaching was false and the ancient culture would have to revise its teaching. Is God love, and are all men to share in him and his divine generosity?

Are Gentile and Samaritan to sit down in the kingdom of God with the children of Abraham? Is the enlightened self-interest of the doctors of the law to give way to the doctrine of self-sacrifice? The thought is intolerable. Rather than that we will silence the appealing and appalling voice, nail down those hands and feet, rack from the world the person who brings good tidings to all men of good-will. Otherwise we shall have to endure the agony of thinking out again our whole life-programme, alter our preposterous conventions and, unthinkable shame, admit that we have been wrong. Away with him, away with him! There is nothing so murderous as a religion that has been petrified into a ceremonial or sterilised into a mere morality. Religion is the relationship between the divine persons and the human, and when God in person comes among us, we can only make one of two choices: to accept him wholly or wipe him off the face of the earth. Very well, then, we choose: crucify him, crucify him; his blood be upon us and upon our children.

So they come to the place of execution. Here we may notice that the four evangelists, who move step by step through the whole story of the Passion in considerable detail, slip the words 'they crucified him' almost in a parenthesis into a stricken sentence. It was a terrible thing for them to do to write those words down. See who they were: St Matthew, whom our Lord had drawn from his lucrative tax-gathering; St Mark, who drew his account from one who had his own agonising memories of those twenty-four hours; St Luke, who, it seems, had the story from our Lady and she—a thought we dare not dwell upon—saw these things happening; St John, who was the only apostle to stand beneath the Cross. Where they are reticent, we may be too. After all, we are shallow people if we speak easily about our deepest experiences. But if those three words, 'they crucified him', do not echo as hammer-strokes in your heart, then you know nothing about religion as yet, nothing about God's ways with men. 'Take up your cross and follow me' are words we have heard since our earliest years and we know it is our duty to obey them. And yet, when we make our acts of submission to God's will and express our willingness to accept whatever cross he sends us, can we avoid saying, in our inmost heart, 'O Lord, I offer you everything; but, of course, you will not ask of me . . . *that*'? 'That' is our dearest treasure, the thing that really gives an impetus to our lives, the

thing we really want to keep—our money, perhaps, or beauty, or somebody's love, or our position in society. 'O Lord, please take anything, but that.' Be very sure, my brethren, that that is exactly what God will ask of you—your dearest treasure, the thing that you think you ought not to have asked of you, that without which your life will seem an empty shell, the thing that you really do best, the very thing you are doing for God himself, your very justification for existing. That is what God will ask of you. In the cruel days we are living through, many of you have no doubt already found that out. If you have not, one day, in the measure in which you are willing to serve God, you will. Then you will know what Christ meant when he said: 'If I shall be lifted up on high, I will draw all things to me . . .'. For God does not do this out of cruelty; he is only asking of you your best; he is only treating you as he treated himself in his Son. One day you will say to God: 'O God, I have nothing left at all. I am stripped naked, utterly destitute, deprived of everything I made my life. I have nothing at all left . . . but, of course, You.' And in that day you will be able to lift your eyes to the Cross and say: 'Now, Lord, now I begin to understand'.

The afternoon draws on and it grows mysteriously dark beneath the Cross. At last, with a loud cry, our Lord gives up his spirit to his Father and dies. And immediately, we read, the great veil of the temple that hid the Holy of Holies was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. Of course, for it was the old Jerusalem that died in that moment while Christ reigns for ever from the Cross. The heart of religion is no hieratic mystery for the High Priest to contemplate alone; the heart of religion is there pierced open on the Cross, the perfect self-sacrifice perfectly offered to the Father. In wonderful humility our Lord had already compared his function to the world of nature. 'If the grain of wheat fall not into the ground and die, itself remains alone.' Alone; not fulfilling its function; for unless it dies to itself, it cannot fructify and never will the corn spring forth and fill the valleys and uplands of the world with the harvest flood of gold. So God himself will die that the New Jerusalem of the Church may reign and save.

God and nature exhibit the law of self-sacrifice; in between comes the world of men and they too must follow that same law. And we can state it very simply, like this; that what you live for, you must be ready to die for. Humanity surrounds certain callings

with high dignity: the mother, the priest, the teacher, the ruler. It grants these dignities because it perceives in these callings a sacrificial function. The mother must dare death to bring her child into the world and face another kind of dying when her child grows up to need her no longer. The priest must be ready to die for his flock and undergo that daily death of the willing sacrifice of his time and his peace of mind for their sakes. The function of the teacher is to make his pupils more learned and intelligent than himself, of the ruler to see his people grow in independence and responsibility. How easy it is for these beings to mistake the dignity for the function, for the mother to keep her children on her apron-strings, for priest and teacher and ruler to keep their subjects under their thumb! If they do, they remain alone; they have not died to give life to others. 'They have their rewards', St Augustine says in his terrible way: damnation—'emptiness to the empty. *Acceperunt mercedem suam, vani vanam.*' And for all men, great or small, the essential message is the same: 'Bear ye one another's burdens'. As a great and noble-minded woman has recently said: 'If only people would realise the efficiency of this ancient precept'.

It is easy for us to see now that the great triple order of God and man and nature follow the same law, the law of self-sacrifice. It is easy to see now, but only because of the first Good Friday, when Christ made it clear beyond dispute by fulfilling it literally and exactly upon the Cross. The Cross becomes the key that solves thus the pattern of the entire universe. Meanwhile, beneath the Cross on which hangs dead the Lord of life, stands a body of men and women who have lost, it seems, the only thing that could make a reason for their existence, the only thing that God could surely never ask of them. Utterly despondent, the men and women who, in a few short weeks, are to be the foundations of the most extensive and illustrious society the world can ever see, watch the darkness gather about their dead Lord. They see the darkness; we see more. For, as night sweeps down upon us like a great curtain from the eastern steppes of the continent, we know that behind it are flickering into life the innumerable candles of *Tenebrae*, pursuing night like a forest fire. And long before the last candle of *Tenebrae* is out or the Prayer of Jeremias is silent, over on the other side of the planet the Paschal candle will flame up and the voice of the deacon chant the *Exultet* as morning

strikes the antipodes. But the apostles, that night, had no vision of Easter. Utterly desolate, they take their dead Lord from the Cross and bear him to the tomb. And there, amid the spices and the silence, we must leave him, waiting for Easter Day.



AUSTERITY AND REALITY IN DIET

DR A. G. BADENOCH

FATHER Gerald Vann, O.P., in an article in a 1951 *Blackfriars* accused the modern world of flight into phantasy and counselled a return to reality. The Editor, in a later number, suggested forming some sort of Blackfriars Group, where questions so raised might be discussed in the light of what many of us are calling the Dominican Way. The Editor of *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* has been suggesting for some time that I should write something on diet, and especially fasting.

Can I, no philosopher, put all these three indications together and write on that one aspect of reality to which I give most of my study, nutrition?

We may phantasise a good deal about many practical matters and get away with it, but the fundamental things of nature pay a quick dividend, in good coin or bad, according to how we deal with their crude reality. Nutrition and dietetics might once have been classified with what Whitehead called 'matters of fact', the things we take for granted. Catering was for the housewife, food-preparation was for the cook. 'Come and git it' was the cry in the Wild West shack; or the dinner-gong rang in the Priory; and we ate and were filled. And there was an end to it. The rest was silence, the silence of the good digestion that waited on appetite and the quiet processes of metabolism that waited on both.

We moderns have changed all that. Nutrition is no longer a matter-of-fact in this country. Sometimes I think the word is rather a *lucus a non lucendo*: it suggests by contrast between what is the reality and what might be, what ought to be, the (quite attainable) ideal. Unfortunately our tendency to phantasise, our flight from reality, makes us wishfully suppose that some sort of approach to the ideal is being automatically attained; and with the *panem nostrum quotidianum* petition devoutly murmured we file