

# FROM DEATH TO LIFE

## *The Gospels of the First Week in Lent*

By DONAL O'SULLIVAN

**T**o become dead to our sins and to live for holiness'. This is St. Peter's description of the aim of a Christian life.<sup>1</sup> It is no abstract deadening or abstract holiness that he envisages it is a mortifying and a rising through, with and in Christ. 'Rejoice, when you share in some measure the sufferings of Christ; so joy will be yours and triumph when his glory is revealed. Your lot will be a blessed one . . . it means that the virtue of God's honour and glory and power, it means that his own Spirit, is resting upon you'.<sup>2</sup> Lent, in the mind of the Church, is the great period of preparation for the annual commemoration of her founder's passing-over from death to life; a commemoration that is not empty and abstract but is the sacramental re-presentation of the Paschal mystery, of the passion, death and resurrection of the Saviour. It is a period of intense and ardent aiming at the Christian ideal of 'learning to know him, and the virtue of his resurrection, and what it means to share his sufferings, moulded into the pattern of *his* death, in the hope of achieving resurrection from the dead'.<sup>3</sup> Lent, the fast that is a feast – so the liturgy describes it – demands a joyous sincerity in our exercise of penance, in purging out the old leaven, so that when Christ our pasch is sacrificed we may feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.<sup>4</sup> The more sincere our struggle, in Christ, against our lower selves during Lent, the more sincere and meaningful will be the renewal of the promises of our Baptism during the Easter vigil, and the greater the increase of Baptismal grace. What this grace is, Mother Church makes quite clear in her exhortation to the children whom she has brought to life in Christ. 'By Baptism we have been buried with Christ into death. As Christ, then, has risen from the dead, so we too must walk now in newness of life. For we know that our old self has been crucified with Christ, that we may no longer be slaves to sin. Let us remember always that we have died to sin, but are to live for God, in Christ Jesus our Lord'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 2,24.      <sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 4,13-14.      <sup>3</sup> Phil 3,10-11.

<sup>4</sup> Easter Sunday epistle. 1 Cor 5,7-8.      <sup>5</sup> Easter vigil liturgy.

Led by the Spirit and the Bride into the desert of Lent, 'let us fix our eyes on Jesus' as He is shown to us in the gospels of the first week passing from temptation to transfiguration. Only with 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus' can we securely deal with the Tempter and his temptations; only in His light can we peer into the darkness of evil; only in His strength – and how repeatedly the liturgy reminds us of this! – can we ever hope to 'rid ourselves of all that weighs us down and the sin that does so closely beset us'.<sup>1</sup> That light and strength is what is begged for, 'through Jesus Christ our Lord', in every Lenten Mass. 'Enlighten our minds, we pray thee, Lord, by the brightness of thy shining, so that we may be able to see what we should do, and have the strength to do it'.<sup>2</sup>

SUNDAY *Matthew 4,1-11*

'Turn these stones into bread . . . cast thyself down to earth . . . fall down and adore me . . . Begone, Satan!' No stranger dialogue than this could be imagined: Christ, the Son of God, the second Adam, on the one side; Satan, the Adversary, the overthrower of the first Adam, on the other. It is reported to us by our Lord Himself – no one else knew of it – to be a warning against the almost daily dialogues that Satan will try to initiate with each one of us, and also to be an example full of grace for dealing with them. That starving man, who was also God, could only be tempted externally. We, children in the flesh of the first Adam, have an enemy within, inherited from Adam because of his fall. Indeed it is that frequent soliciting to evil, sometimes nagging, sometimes crudely violent, that is our sad inward testimony to the truth of revelation as to a primal fall and the existence of 'the devil, our enemy, who goes about roaring like a lion to find his prey'.<sup>3</sup> Whatever advantage we gain in modern spiritual direction from a more exact psychological knowledge is at times entirely negated by our serious lack of actual belief in the devil. The amusement which twentieth-century man draws from the 'legend' of St. Anthony or the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch is an indication that he is perilously unaware of the tragic tension between the 'kingdom of God's beloved Son'<sup>4</sup> and the kingdom of 'the prince of this world'.<sup>5</sup> The gospels, especially that of St. John, remain unintelligible to him, because he belongs to 'those whose unbelieving minds have been blinded by the god

<sup>1</sup> Heb 12,1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Prayer over the people. Wed. Week I.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Pet 5,8.

<sup>4</sup> Col 1,13.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 12,31.

this world worships, so that the glorious gospel of Christ, God's image, cannot reach them with the rays of its illumination'.<sup>1</sup>

An awareness, then, of our fallen condition and of the diabolical powers that are pitted against us in temptation can be the first fruit that we draw from the consideration of this dramatic duel in the desert. And confidence in our ultimate victory must come from the victory of Christ in whom, through his sacred humanity, we are incorporated. 'Draw your strength from the Lord, from that mastery which his power supplies. You must wear all the weapons in God's armoury, if you would find strength to resist the cunning of the devil. It is not against flesh and blood that we enter the lists: we have to do with principedoms and powers, with those who have mastery of the world in these dark days, with malign influences in an order higher than ours'.<sup>2</sup> The trust essential to victory will be increased by another awareness – that of the loving-kindness of the Saviour in sharing with us the humiliation of temptation and in a certain sense that of sin. 'Christ never knew sin', wrote St. Paul, before going on to startle the Corinthians and ourselves by adding: 'And God made him into sin for us, so that in him we might be turned into the holiness of God'.<sup>3</sup> It is this Jesus who is 'dispossessed',<sup>4</sup> who is made 'an accursed thing',<sup>5</sup> who gives us, in the loneliness of temptation and the despair that follows sin, a new trust that is born from our knowledge of His fellow-feeling with us. 'It is not as if our high priest was incapable of feeling for us in our humiliations; he has been through every trial, fashioned as we are, only sinless'.<sup>6</sup> For many souls, pride and self-confidence is a greater danger in temptation than their weakness. Their surest antidote is the grace-force that flows from the tempted yet triumphant Christ, and the weapon to their hand is that which He himself used in the desert, 'the words of the spirit, God's word'.<sup>7</sup> 'What great matter is it if an angel be strong? But it is a great matter if flesh is strong'.<sup>8</sup>

MONDAY *Matthew* 25,31-46

But the mighty sword that is God's word can be for our judgement as well as for our strengthening. 'The man who makes me of no account, and does not accept my words, has a judge appointed to try him; it is the message I have uttered that will be his judge at

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor 4,4.

<sup>2</sup> Eph 6,10-12.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 5,8.

<sup>4</sup> Phil 2,7.

<sup>5</sup> Gal 3,13.

<sup>6</sup> Heb 4,15.

<sup>7</sup> Eph 6,17.

<sup>8</sup> Aug. In Ps. 138.

the last day'.<sup>1</sup> If I 'have been given a share in Christ',<sup>2</sup> so has my neighbour. It is in the context of that sharing that we shall both be judged: not as individuals in some vague vacuum, but as members of the 'one body in Christ', where 'each acts as the counterpart of the other'.<sup>3</sup> That is not to deny in the least the importance of individual salvation; nor does the liturgy of the first week in Lent leave us in the slightest doubt about it. Friday's gospel could not do more to impress it upon us; Wednesday's gospel paints the frightening picture of the devil's return to the soul that he has 'left for a while'; and the epistles of Thursday and Friday from the prophecy of Ezechiel destroy the too apt facility with which Jews of the sixth century B.C. and Christians of the twentieth century A.D. equate sin with the consequences of heredity. 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are being set on edge! As I am the living God, the Lord says, this proverb shall be current in Israel no more'.<sup>4</sup> But there is a marked emphasis laid on the collective aspect of sin; on the *mysterium iniquitatis*, the *massa damnationis*, on 'the lump of sin'. *Plebs*, *populus*, *fideles*, *ecclesia*, *familia* occur in every Mass during the week, as indeed they and cognate words are to be met frequently in the liturgy of all the seasons of the year.

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory . . . he will divide men one from the other, as the shepherd divides the sheep from the goats'. But that division men themselves have already made in the days of their mortal life: the judgment of the Son of Man will but confirm and make public the judgments that they have already passed upon themselves. Our judgment will not be on what we did in an ideal world, as so often our earthly judgments in our favour are inclined to be, but on what we did in a world where there are people who must eat and drink, who break the law of the land and are sent to prison by an earthly judge, who are sick and badly clothed and have no shelter for the night. In as far as we have seen Christ in them and been Christ to them, we shall find ourselves on the right hand of the judge. If we have lived as islands and refused to allow the great *pontifex*, the bridgebuilder, to bridge the gulf between them and us, we shall be damned. A lenten spirituality, whatever mortifications it may include, that does not lead us to a greater charity is not merely suspect: it is un-Christian. Lent, as we have seen, is our preparation for our insertion into Christ's mysterious passover from death to life (baptism being its 'sign'): and we must

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 12,18.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 3,14.

<sup>3</sup> Rom 12,5.

<sup>4</sup> Ezek 18,2-3.

'remember that we have changed over from death to life in loving the brethren as we do'.<sup>1</sup> For love cannot be divided: we cannot say we love Christ when we hate Him or neglect Him in those He has identified with Himself – our fellow men. All we 'who are reckoned as Christians', *qui christiana professione censentur*, have a double duty to love in a time when hate and dissensions make us fear even for the continuance of our physical world. 'For it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when or why, or how, or where'. The poet is right; millions have left God for no god. But it is lack of love rather than lack of light, as far as one may separate what God has joined, that has led them into the waste and void. Every day of these present years we are living, materialistic atheism is forcing us Christians to sit in judgment upon ourselves. It is – provided we have faith – one of the great sacraments of the present moment: 'now is the judgment'.<sup>2</sup> We are each and all our brothers' keepers through the love-example that we are bound to give by the very fact of our calling ourselves 'Christians'. 'By *this* shall all men know that you are *my* disciples'.<sup>3</sup> The gospel of the first Monday in Lent provides us with an examination as topical as it is salutary, on the essence of Christianity.

TUESDAY *Matthew 21, 10-19*

The gospel of the cleansing of the temple puts before us a Lord who will cleanse His Church and her children by fear if worldliness and material interests should have shut their ears to the call of love. 'Then Jesus went into the temple of God, and drove out from it all those who sold and bought there, and overthrew the tables of the bankers, and the chairs of the pigeon-sellers'. The Church is divine; she is also human. And good and evil, wheat and cockle, will be found in her children until the day of final judgment. 'It is impossible that scandals should not come'.<sup>4</sup> But Christ's sad recognition of the fact has not prevented Him from renewing, by the universal scourges of history and by the mischances of our individual lives, the mystery of the cleansing. 'Let them fear God in love' said Saint Benedict. When the blow falls and our laden tables are overturned, our faith must aid us to know that the hand is still the hand of Christ and that His justice is a loving one. The more loving and

<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 3, 14.    <sup>2</sup> Jn 12, 31.    <sup>3</sup> Jn 13, 35.    <sup>4</sup> Lk 17, 1.

the more understanding our response, the more effective will be our purification. 'Christ shewed love to the Church when he gave himself up on its behalf. He would hallow it, purify it . . . he would summon it into his own presence, the Church in all its beauty, no stain, no wrinkle, no such disfigurement; it was to be holy, it was to be spotless'.<sup>1</sup> But the Church is no abstract idea; it is the stains and wrinkles of our individual sins that mar the beauty of the Church. That beauty we can help to restore by the lenten mortifications that we assume, but, above all, by seeing and welcoming the cleansing hand of Christ in all the chances and changes of our lives.

WEDNESDAY *Matthew 12,38-50*

But such a seeing and welcoming is an acknowledgement that we are sinners. The Pharisees of Wednesday's gospel, as always, refuse to make any such admission. They isolate themselves from the common sinful mass of mankind and in doing so reject the redemption that is offered them. Wicked and unfaithful, they will be shamed at the judgment day by 'the men of Nineve' and 'the queen of the south'. To them were addressed some of the hardest words ever spoken by Jesus. 'Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites; because you are like to whitened sepulchres, which outwardly appear to men beautiful, but within are full of dead men's bones, and of all filthiness'.<sup>2</sup> Self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction was their mark: their very name means separated. And in this they were the direct antithesis of the meekness and lowliness of Jesus. They were the experts on sin – but on the sin of others: they wrote glosses on the glosses of the law till they had long lost its spirit and had become arid and self-canonised legalists. They would have stoned to death the woman taken in adultery had not Jesus saved her by challenging them on their boasted sinlessness. And feeding all their many sins was the fearful guilt of deliberate blindness, their will not to see. 'Are we blind too?' they asked the Source of all light. 'If you were', Jesus told them, 'you would not be guilty. It is because you protest "We can see clearly" that you cannot be rid of your guilt'.<sup>3</sup>

Pharisaism as a sect is long dead – though its influences reach even into the Jewry of today; as a fact it lives, and corrupts true religion; and it masquerades, now as then, under the guise of zeal for the observance of the law's letter. It lies in ambush for the zealot;

<sup>1</sup> Eph 5,25-27.    <sup>2</sup> Mt 23,27.    <sup>3</sup> Jn 9,41.

it is the parasite of piety. It talks of observance and sin, but it has no true sense of sin as a wilful opposition of the human will to the will of the Creator; above all it fails to see in it the negation of the sweet charity of the Father. It refuses the family relationship that is offered by Christ to His poorest disciple because it has blinded its eyes to its beauty. The gospel we are discussing shows our Lord stretching out His hands towards His disciples and saying: 'If anyone does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother, and sister, and mother'.<sup>1</sup> But the pharisee of all times lacks the 'simple eye' that would put him body and soul into the homely light of our Lord's family circle. A sense of sin brings the prodigal back to his father's house; whereas the boastful prayer: 'I am not as the rest of men'<sup>2</sup> keeps the pharisee from a 'share in the fellowship . . . Fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ . . . God dwells in light: if we too move and live in light, there is fellowship between us.'<sup>3</sup> Many sins will be forgiven us – on the condition that we have loved much. Lenten fasts or any other exterior observances that are not informed by true charity can be a grave danger to our spiritual lives. And the danger is all the greater where there is a tradition either of conservative catholicism or of puritanism. That tradition does, it is true, preserve a sense of sin: but too often it is a sense of the neighbour's sin. In such a climate, those 'who have confidence in themselves . . . and despise the rest of the world'<sup>4</sup> may only too easily thrive and set a standard of mere external observance that is far from Christ's: 'Be ye perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect'.<sup>5</sup>

THURSDAY *Matthew* 15,21–28

Here we see Jesus dealing very differently with a very different type. The Chanaanite woman who begs for her daughter's cure is no expert in the law. For the pharisee she would be outside the law, a pariah, an outcast. We, who are also gentiles, may see in her a type of reconciliation and participation in the great mercy of Christ and an example of how we are to approach Him in our needs. 'A woman, a Chanaanite by birth . . . cried aloud: 'Have pity on me, Lord, thou Son of David. My daughter is cruelly troubled by an evil spirit'.<sup>6</sup> In the Church, we have to make for

<sup>1</sup> Mt 12,50.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 18,11.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Jn 1,3–7.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 18,9.

<sup>5</sup> Mt 5,48.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 15,22.

practical reasons the distinction between the 'born Catholic' and the 'convert'. In these weeks, when we are preparing for a new outpouring of baptismal grace at Easter, it is most salutary to remember (which we rarely do) that we too are 'Chanaanites by birth'. No one is born a Catholic; each is born 'cruelly troubled by an evil spirit' from whom we have to be delivered as surely as the young pagan girl – and by the same power of Christ now spread far and wide beyond the narrow bounds of Israel through His continuing presence in His Church. 'I bid thee begone, unclean spirit, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost . . . Accursed fiend, acknowledge thy doom and give honour to the living and true God, give honour to Jesus Christ, His Son, and to the Holy Ghost, and keep far away from this servant of God, because Jesus Christ our Lord and God has been pleased to call him to his holy grace'.<sup>1</sup> A more vivid appreciation of this holy grace and an understanding of Baptism as our Christian initiation is one of the principal reasons for the remodelling of the Easter liturgy. With it will return what is so lacking in our age, a sense of sin, a spirit of compunction. 'The greatest sin at the moment', said Pope Pius XII in 1946, 'is that men have begun by losing the sense of sin'. But it is not any kind of Jansenism or morbid spirit of introspection that we need: it is rather the 'tasting of the goodness of God' as it frees us from original guilt and our own personal sins. There is nothing morbid about the Chanaanite woman. Rather she gives evidence of great good humour and great humility when she acquiesces so readily in our Lord's reference to her people as 'dogs'. Nor is there the slightest trace of morbidity in St. Peter's two letters, though they certainly show a great awareness of sin and its iniquity. The accent is on gratitude and hope and trust. 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people God meant to have for himself; it is yours to proclaim the exploits of the God who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'.<sup>2</sup>

FRIDAY *John* 5, 1-15

The cripple whose cure is narrated in Friday's gospel also proclaimed the exploits of the God-Man who called him from the darkness of bodily disease to the lightness of health: and quite probably also from the darkness of sin to the light of grace. 'The man went

<sup>1</sup> Rite of Baptism.      <sup>2</sup> 1 Pet 2, 9.



back and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had restored his strength'. But what determines the liturgical choice of the gospel is the stern warning that Jesus gives about sin to the man who had been lying disabled by the pool for thirty-eight years: 'Behold, thou hast recovered thy strength; do not sin any more, for fear that worse should befall thee'. To take little account of the sternness of Jesus when He speaks of sin would be to scandalously edulcorate His teaching. His immense love for sinners is matched by His hatred for sin; He shows the tenderest of understanding for the sin but He never in the slightest condones it. 'Has no one condemned thee? No one, Lord, she said. And Jesus said to her, I will not condemn thee either. Go, and do not sin again henceforward'.<sup>1</sup>

On the eve of His public life Jesus was pointed out as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'.<sup>2</sup> The man who said that had himself gone 'all over the country announcing a baptism whereby men repented, to have their sins forgiven'.<sup>3</sup> And our Lord's own first preaching was: 'Repent, and believe the gospel'.<sup>4</sup> Nor did it change: 'Except you do penance, you shall all likewise perish'.<sup>5</sup> What is here referred to is not penance as we now understand it in the sense of mortification, but a whole-hearted changing over, a genuine conversion, a saying good-bye to oneself (the literal meaning of our 'self-denial'), a reversal of values – in practice as well as in theory, a passing-over from the darkness of spiritual death to life 'in Christ'. And the failure to do so means separation from Christ here, with the fearful possibility of eternal separation from Him afterwards. However unpalatable it may be to our self-love, the paradoxical death-life law that runs through all Christ's teaching is neglected only with grave peril: 'he that will save his life shall lose it, and he that shall lose his life for my sake shall find it'.<sup>6</sup> When we ask ourselves why, even allowing for human weakness, this repeated demand for a thorough conversion often meets with so little serious response in Catholic lives, we find it hard to give any single adequate answer. And the aid which we can get from the sacrament of penance makes it still more puzzling. Sometimes we may blame a mechanical use of the sacrament with little or no genuine purpose of amendment: there is no genuine awakening to the gravity of our situation and our sorrow is superficial. This can obviously have its source in lack of prayer, especially real personal prayer.

<sup>1</sup> Jn 8,10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 1,29.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 3,3.

<sup>4</sup> Mk 1,15.

<sup>5</sup> Lk 13,5.

<sup>6</sup> Mt 16,25.

But we might also ask ourselves if the clear-cut views of Jesus on sin and conversion have not been to some extent blurred by a legalism and an externalism which are the by-product of our manuals of moral theology and our catechisms. Is there not a danger – increased by the frequency of our confessions – that we look only to the fact that sin is forbidden and scarcely advert at all to its malice? The punishment for sin is not seen as inwardly and necessarily connected with it: God is regarded more as one who threatens the sinner with hell rather than as one who will say to the unrepentant sinner: ‘Thy will be done’. And the consequence is generally a minimum service of God, a disregard of venial sin and the obliteration of any desire for progress. The continuous effort to correct our venial sins and to advance in God’s love – which is what spiritual writers mean by a ‘second conversion’ – is the Christian ideal. Let us at least preach it and awaken the desire for it in souls. ‘Hast thou a mind to recover thy strength? . . . Take up thy bed and walk’.<sup>1</sup>

SATURDAY *Matthew 17,1-9*

The encouragement to persevere in the struggle with temptation and sin, and to walk to the mountain of God, is given by the mystery of the transfiguration. Jesus drew from it strength for His own coming struggle – it is placed between two announcements of the passion – and we must also be fortified by it in our passage from darkness to light, to the *lumen Christi* of the Easter vigil and to the ultimate *lumen glorie* of heaven. Even at this early stage of Lent, we can ask ourselves whether the Resurrection of Christ and that of our own bodies holds anything like the place it should in our spiritual lives. For centuries the passion has been stressed – not infrequently overstressed – to the detriment of our practical belief in the Resurrection; and it will take many years of the restored Easter liturgy to redress the balance. The Paschal mystery is a mystery of death and life, of Passion and Resurrection. ‘Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, *and so* to enter into his glory?’.<sup>2</sup> But – if only we could *realise* it – we have, by Baptism, already entered into His glory even though its shining cannot yet transfuse and permeate our mortal bodies as it did the body of Jesus in the transfiguration on Thabor. ‘In our baptism, we have been buried with him, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his

<sup>1</sup> Jn 5,6 and 8.      <sup>2</sup> Lk 24,26.

Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence. We have to be closely fitted into the pattern of his resurrection, as we have been into the pattern of his death'.<sup>1</sup> It requires indeed a great exercise of the theological virtues to live and move in this new kind of existence while we are at the same time involved so intimately in the life of the senses. The seed is in us, 'Christ in you, your hope of glory',<sup>2</sup> but while we are in these bodies of death and 'the whole world about us lies in the power of evil',<sup>3</sup> it is only the faith that we 'demanded' of the Church of God in Baptism that can empower us to envisage the final glory of the flower in the hidden seed. 'What do you ask of the Church of God? Faith. Of what does Faith assure you? Life everlasting'.<sup>4</sup>

In no period of her history has the Church ever ceased to foster in her 'faithful' that implanted faith, and to remind us that '*even now* we are sons of God'.<sup>5</sup> But the Spirit has his 'times and moments'. Today, caught up in an almost tangible outpouring of the Spirit, millions have a new consciousness in mind and in heart of the divine indwelling and of the power that it gives them to conquer the death of sin and to *live* in Christ. Through the scriptural and liturgical 'movements' of the present century, the generation that has to face collective death, physical and moral, has 'all the wealth of Christ's inspiration'<sup>6</sup> for their guide and the fat of the eucharistic wheat for their strength. They know, with a new knowledge, that 'he that is in us is greater than he that is in the world'.<sup>7</sup> The texts of these lenten gospels are no dead words; 'the word of God to us is alive, full of energy'.<sup>8</sup> And it is Christ's transfigured body, once physically, now sacramentally, broken for us that the gospel prepares us to receive. It is the same living God who looks down on us at the breaking of the bread, and testifies to us also that we are His beloved sons, brothers of His Only-begotten. So we 'catch the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, with faces unveiled; and become transfigured into the same likeness, borrowing glory from that glory, as the spirit of the Lord enables us'.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom 6,4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Col 1,27.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Jn 5, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Liturgy of Baptism.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Jn 3,2.

<sup>6</sup> Col 3,16.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Jn 4,4.

<sup>8</sup> Heb 4,12.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Cor 3,18.