

YOUR ADVERSARY

By JOHN SHEETS

At the beginning of his epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul describes the nature and dignity of his vocation. It is his privilege to proclaim the mysterious design hidden from eternity in the mind of God. The Holy Spirit had given men some intimations of this design through the words of the prophets. But it was not until the fullness of time that God revealed his purpose clearly: which was to restore all things in Christ. 'And this his good pleasure he purposed in him to be dispensed in the fullness of the times; to re-establish all things in Christ, both those in the heavens and those on earth'.¹ This mystery of the restoration of all things in Christ and through Christ is the mystery of the Church, which in turn is the mystery of unity of the fallen world that needed redemption, with the Redeemer who did not need redemption.

St. Paul identifies the mystery of Christ with the mystery of the Church. Both are the expression of God's mysterious design. '... You can perceive how well versed I am in the mystery of Christ, that mystery which in other ages was not known to the sons of men, as now it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit: namely, that the Gentiles are joint heirs, and fellow-members of the same body, and joint partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus, through the gospel'.²

But if the fullness of time brought the final unveiling of God's design to unite men to him in Christ and through Christ, it also brought the final unveiling of the power and activity of the devil. Along with the revelation of the full dimensions of the love of God and his design for men, there is revealed the full dimensions of the hostility of the Adversary. Only when the Head of the Kingdom of Light appears do the rays of truth penetrate into the depths of darkness to uncover there the Prince of Darkness.

That shadow which played back and forth over the surface of the earth, that was present in the Garden of Eden, that moved about in the dark groves on the tops of the hills where the Baals were worship-

¹ Eph 1, 10.

² Eph 1, 4-6.

ped, that loitered in the pagan temples, and found a home in the hearts of the pagan priests, that shadowy figure hidden in ambiguity and anonymity is now completely unmasked. The Light of the World is also the light which throws the figure of the devil into sharp silhouette against the world in which he exercises his unceasing activity. It removes the vagueness of his features, the anonymity of his presence. The obscurity which cloaked his methods from the time of the first temptation down through the history of the human race is taken away. He is revealed to have been a liar and a murderer from the beginning.¹

It is the continual effort of the devil to be vaporized away again into shadowy anonymity. The Prince of Darkness cannot stand the Light. 'For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, that his deeds may not be exposed'.² When modern man consigns the devil to the darkness, he leads the devil home. Man himself covers the devil with the darkness which is his natural habitat. When his existence is denied, or he is reduced to some vague impersonal force, or he is declared to be the product of superstitious people who do not understand the mysteries of depth psychology, then man is reversing the act of Christ's revelation. Christ uncovered the devil, but man once more casts the cloak of darkness about him.

It is through Christ, then, that man knows the meaning of the Adversary. Much has been written about the notion which the Jews had in the Old Testament about the demoniacal powers, and how they arrived at this notion. Any research which can illumine these questions is undoubtedly useful. But the important thing to realise is that it is Christ who uncovers the complete reality of the devil. The hour of Jesus in which the love of God will be revealed is also the hour of the power of darkness. The hour in which men will come to know the love of God is, strangely enough, the hour in which men shall come to know the devil. And the hour of the devil is the hour of those who accomplish his designs. 'This is your hour, and the power of darkness'.³

The mission of Christ, the Light of the World, is continued through space and time in the Church. In her function of bringing the Light to all men the Church, as she continually reveals Christ, must inevitably continue to reveal Satan. In each age she must unmask him; she must declare to each age that he goes about like a

¹ Jn 8, 44 ff.

² Jn 3, 20.

³ Lk 22, 53.

roaring lion, seeking those whom he will devour.¹ The Church would be unfaithful to her mission to teach all nations *all* the truths which Christ himself taught, if she did not remind each generation that they have an adversary, who is a person, who is wise, cunning, and powerful, and who is consumed with an undying hatred for God, and for all those who can enter into that mysterious design, hidden in the mind of God from all eternity, which is to restore all things in Christ.

It is a mistake to think of the activity of the devil as directed against isolated units of mankind in a sort of a hand-to-hand combat to see who can gain the mastery. There is in all the activity of the devil a deliberate and manifest opposition to Christ. As the Father's design is to restore all things in his Son, so it is the devil's to prevent this restoration. Herod sought the life of the Child, not so much as an individual, but as a threat to his own kingdom. The devil also seeks the life of the Child, but since Christ can die no more and death no longer has any dominion over him, the devil seeks to kill him in his members.

The devil is aware that God's purpose of re-establishing all things in Christ is to find its fulfilment in the union of the members with the Head. For this reason the Church is the special object of the hatred of the devil. Throughout the Church's history the devil has always had his powerful human instruments, who throw themselves with a kind of mad frenzy against the visible Church. Whether with lying propaganda or the force of arms, they continue to proclaim that this is their hour, and the hour of the power of darkness. It is directly aimed at the hierarchical structure of the Church, for if this were destroyed the Church would cease to exist.

It is not by accident that godless governments direct their hostility against the hierarchy. The devil, though his kingdom has been overcome by the power of Christ, does not think in terms of co-existence. The Church's mission is Christ's mission: that men may have life, and have it more abundantly. The devil's mission is that men may have death. He was a murderer from the beginning.

THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE LIGHT AND THE DARKNESS

The mystery of God's everlasting love for man is revealed as restoring and uniting all things in Christ. With this revelation of the

¹ 1 Pet 5, 8.

full dimensions of the divine love is also revealed the full dimensions of the personality and power of the Adversary. The sharpest area of conflict will be found where the intensity of this loving union of God and man is greatest, in the Church. All temptations of the devil are ultimately directed against the fulfilment of Christ's prayer: 'that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them and thou in me; that they may be perfected in unity'.¹

The features of the Adversary will naturally come into sharpest focus through the words and actions of Christ, in the mystery of his temptation in the desert. It is a mistake in emphasis to see this temptation merely as 'single combat'. We need hardly point out that to explain this mysterious encounter as simple temptations to gluttony, to a lack of trust in God, and to pride, would be superficial in the extreme.

In all the synoptics, the temptation of Christ in the desert immediately precedes the preaching of the Kingdom. It is something like the 'argument' of the drama of the rest of Christ's life, the action of the player who comes on the stage before the performance to explain the argument of the plot to the audience. The threefold temptation brings out three aspects of the strategy of Christ by which he is to achieve the establishment of the Kingdom. The defeat which the devil suffers at this moment in the desert is the type of the defeat he shall suffer when the King is hanging on a cross on the hill of Golgotha. By this same strategy the members of Christ's body are to overcome the devil continually throughout space and time, until the end of the world.

What, then, are the three aspects of this strategy of Christ? Perhaps they can be stated first of all in a negative way: the Kingdom of Christ will not be established by physical power or by force; nor will it be established merely by the word of Christ without the corresponding response in the heart of man. As the Baptist said, 'God is able out of these stones to raise up children to Abraham'.² Christ could change the stones into bread, but he cannot by a word change a man into a member of his Kingdom, unless the man himself adds his own word to the word of Christ. We enter into the Kingdom by responding to an invitation, not because we are brought to our knees by an irresistible *tour de force*. His Kingdom shall be established by a much greater *tour de force*. It is the force of love, which finds its expression in weakness and the folly of the cross.

¹ Jn 17, 22, 23.

² Mt 3, 9.

The first temptation to change the stones into bread throws into sharp relief the forces which Christ intends to use. It is true that the force of his word works miracles, but every miracle is an expression of his love, and has a real relation to the establishment of his kingdom. A miracle is a sign pointing in two directions. It points to the love of God from which it flows, and to the Kingdom, to which it leads.

Secondly, his Kingdom is not to be established by the type of sensationalism which produces 'results'. There is the desire in the heart of everyone who is zealous for the Kingdom to see immediate, tangible results. There is an impatience with the slow workings of the providence of God. This temptation to by-pass the cross is one that besets those who are sincerely striving for the advancement of the Kingdom. It takes place in the holy city, on the pinnacle of the temple, within the very sanctuary of God. In a sense it is the sin of presumption. It is the tempting of the Lord. It is putting God on trial. It is the situation of Job, who found himself asking God to explain Himself and His methods.

When Christ resists this temptation, he is hinting at something basic in the establishment and growth of his Kingdom. The temptation hardly seems to be a temptation. It follows perfect logic – so it seems. To each of the premisses, Christ could agree. They lead with a certain forcefulness to the conclusion. 'Those whom God loves He will protect (proof: the quotation from Scripture which says that His angels will protect the one who is faithful to Him). But you are especially beloved of God (proof: the voice from the heavens at the time of his baptism: 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'). Therefore, He will protect you in a special way, because of His special love for you'.

What Christ is implying here is that the special love which the Father has for him shall not be exercised or manifested according to the rules of merely human logic. It is the divine logic that the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father shall find its expression in the less tangible, less immediate, but the ultimately all-comprehensive answer of the cross. The glorious servant must first be the suffering Servant. There is a certain mysterious exigency that the Son of God dash his foot against the stone. 'Did not the Christ have to suffer these things before entering into his glory'.¹ There is, then, in the second temptation an encounter between the

¹ Lk 24, 26.

divine logic and the logic of 'reasonableness'. The apostle of reasonableness continually chides God and his methods. When Jesus told his disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem and suffer and die, and then rise again, Peter took Jesus aside, and began to chide him: 'Far be it from thee, O Lord; this will never happen to thee'. And Jesus turned to him and said, 'Get behind me, satan, thou art a scandal to me; for thou dost not mind the things of God, but those of men'.¹ There is the persistent temptation to give advice to God.

Finally, in the third temptation, the true origin of the Kingdom is pointed out. The Kingdom is the gift of the Father to the Son. The gift is related to worship, service and obedience. The 'Father of lies' relates the gift, the service and worship to himself rather than to God. Here again the guiding principle in the foundation of the Kingdom is brought into sharp relief. All that Christ does, he does because it is the will of the Father. His every action is liturgical, set aside, consecrated. 'For them I sanctify myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth'.² This aspect of consecrated service reaches its culmination in his sacrifice on the cross, where the devil and his ally, the world are overthrown: 'Sentence is now being passed on this world; now is the time when the prince of this world is to be cast out. Yes, if only I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself'.³ (In saying this, he prophesied the death he was to die). But the Kingdom remains the gift of the Father, not of anyone else. 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him'.⁴ 'I pray for them: not for the world do I pray, but for those whom thou hast given me'.⁵

In the prophecy of Isaias, the Messiah is identified as the suffering Servant. The second temptation was directed against the notion of suffering; the third is directed against the very notion of servant. In reply, Christ emphasises the perfection of his service: 'The Lord thy God shalt thou worship and him *only* shalt thou serve'. Christ's life and death would be the perfect service and the most exalted worship. 'I do always the things that are pleasing to him'.⁶ Christ's adoration is to be an obedience and a service which accepts death, even the death of the cross.

In this threefold temptation, we have presented the structure on which the Kingdom shall be built. It is the strategy which shall accomplish the restoration of all things in Christ, and through him

¹ Mt 16, 21 ff.

⁴ Jn 6, 44.

² Jn 17, 19.

⁵ Jn 17, 9.

³ Jn 12, 31-3.

⁶ Jn 8, 29.

to the Father. It is a restoration accomplished not simply by the power of the Father's word, but by the response in the heart of the Son. It is a restoration which is also redemption through suffering. It is achieved through perfect service and worship of the Father. Through this encounter of Christ with the Adversary, the power, wisdom and love of the divine strategy are revealed. The power is the power of love, not of physical force. The wisdom is not the wisdom of expediency, but the wisdom of the cross. The love is that of perfect service and devotion to the will of God. All these find their perfect expression in Christ. The members of his body are to be recognised by these same qualities.

THE ADVERSARY AND THE MEMBERS OF THE KINGDOM

The incident of the temptation, as recorded in St. Luke, ends with the words, 'then the devil departed from him for a while'.¹ The devil returned at different stages during the life of Christ; and his action set in motion those events which would lead immediately to the death of Christ: 'But Satan entered into Judas, surnamed Iscariot . . . And he went away and discussed with the chief priest and the captains, how he might betray him to them'.² Satan now seeks the destruction of Christ in the members of his Body. He is by nature a murderer, as our Lord insisted.³ He is *the* death-bearer, the enemy of whatever can bear the life of God. Because the soul of every human being is in fact, or destined to be, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the devil is rightly called the adversary of human nature.

We know that the devil is not answerable for all the temptations which afflict us. Many proceed from the disorder in our natural appetites – the instinctive reaching out for what is or appears to be good for human nature: food, drink, companionship, reputation, success, love, affection and so on. But as someone has well said, our needs are the devil's opportunities. They are all expressions of the desire we have to increase or preserve our lives, or, in the case of the sexual appetite, with the desire to preserve the life of the species. In these very needs, all of which in themselves give life, the devil finds the opportunity to make them bearers of death. That is why those who would ignore Christ's unmasking of the devil tend to lose sight of the need for self-control. Without watchfulness and

¹ Lk 4, 13.

² Lk 22, 3-4.

³ Jn 8, 44.

self-discipline our basic needs inevitably serve as the devil's opportunity. 'Be sober, be watchful! For your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, goes about seeking someone to devour'.¹ The author of the Epistle is merely repeating Christ's warning to his apostles – that his adversary is also theirs. 'Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to have all of you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith may not fail'.²

The specific temptation which the devil aimed at the apostles, and which he aims at all apostles, is a sense of discouragement. It is a sense of failure, of the apparent ineffectiveness of the power of God against the powers of evil. The tiny oasis of the Kingdom of God seems to be engulfed more and more by the kingdom of darkness. We are tempted to take up Satan's own role and to say 'If thou be the Son of God . . .'; to take Christ aside, as Peter did, and chide him for his passion and death, to take issue with his round-about ways for extending his Kingdom. In as far as we succumb, we unconsciously accept the spirit of the Evil One and of his ally, the world: 'Back, satan; thou art a stone in my path; for these thoughts of thine are man's not God's'.³ And eventually our attitude becomes that of Christ's faithless brethren.⁴

The whole process of Christian living can be described as a process of *overcoming* in order that the total restoration in Christ might be accomplished. It means the overcoming by *faith* of what corresponds only to what the eyes can see, or human reason can penetrate; the overcoming by *hope* of tendencies to impatience and discouragement with the ways of God; and the overcoming by *charity* of any compromise in our service of God.

Earlier on we said that the devil's aim is to destroy the unity between Christ and his Church, a unity which exists in him, between all her several members. Christ endows each one of us with the strength and patience of the whole. We are to take courage from the truth that none of us stands alone. Even in our stumbling and faltering in the face of the enemy, our Lord would have us share his triumph, the hymn of his Community, the Church. Because of her union with Christ She, too, has overcome the Adversary – not through her own power, but through his blood.

¹ 1 Pet 5, 8–9.

² Lk 22, 31–32.

³ Mt 16, 23.

⁴ Cf. Jn 7, 4.