

WATERS OF REBIRTH

By MATTHEW O'CONNELL

THE significance of placing solemn baptism and the renewal of baptismal promises within the Easter Vigil can be grasped in its deepest implications only if we attend to the way in which the Church in the beginning, as still in its liturgy, understood the climactic events of Christ's life and her own existence as the prolongation of Christ in history.

The event which provides the basis for this understanding is God's intervention in history at the exodus (included in this term are all the events and realities from the coming out of Egypt up to the entrance into the promised land). Here God's action images forth the 'mystery of God' which is the divine plan for the salvation of men and for the constitution of an eternal people: a plan eternally present in God, revealed in shadowy fashion in the Old Testament, fully revealed and brought to realisation by Christ; one which continues revealed and realised in the Church and her sacraments.

God in his mysterious and unaccountable love had promised Abraham that he would make of his descendents a great people and lead them into a land of their own. He fulfilled his promise when he intervened in the course of human history to rescue the disorganised tribes of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He led them out of Egypt across the Sea of Reeds, through the waters of danger and death that proved to be the life-giving waters in which their enemies perished. In the desert he moulded them into a nation by entering into covenant with them; he would be their God, watching over them, showing them limitless goodness and mercy and fidelity. Israel would, in turn, be his people and his bride, a holy people and a spotless bride, worshipping and serving him alone, inspired in the whole of their existence by the same faithful love for him that had been His astonishing gift to Israel; and compassionate to all who were afflicted because in their own affliction the hand of God had lifted them up, had led the prisoner out of bondage and made his light to shine upon the eyes of the blind.

During the time in the desert God had cared for them. He had turned the bitter waters of Mara sweet for their refreshment, had given them manna to eat and water from the rock to drink. He had

healed their diseases when they looked upon the brazen serpent lifted up, and he had fought for them in the battles that marked their slow progress to Canaan, land of the promise. So often during these years they had 'murmured': they had been discouraged with the struggle, had longed for the days in Egypt, so pleasant now as seen through the haze of deceitful memory; they had rebelled against God and his 'ways', and had always been forgiven.

Israel always looked back to this formative period and these fundamental events of her history as inexhaustibly meaningful, subjecting them to endless meditation and ever-new interpretation. Here God had established his relationship with Israel, had given her a future and a commitment. Only with time, however, and especially with the coming of the prophets did Israel come to realise that the real slavery was not political slavery but sin, that 'Egypt' was the land of sin and idolatry and an ever-present realm of the spirit into which men might so easily enter. The Hebrews came to understand that Canaan was only a temporary 'promised land', given them not as a reward nor as a resting-place but as a place apart where they might serve God; and that the true promised land was a thing of the future. Each year as they celebrated the Passover, the memorial of the sacrifice that had begun the exodus from Egypt, they understood ever more fully that they belonged to a chosen people, a holy people, a priestly people, called upon to make of their lives a continual act of worship.

The prophets also saw, however, that the problem of Israel's sin and infidelity was insoluble in the present state of affairs. God must intervene again, not within the present framework, but as it were by breaking the mould and starting all over again. Yet this new beginning was foreshadowed and prepared for by what God had done before. A new Moses would come to lead men from the slavery of sin and to bring a new law. There would be a new exodus, even a creation, a new covenant and a new people. The newness would be radical: in the hearts of men and not simply in their outward circumstances. In two passages which are climactic moments in the Old Testament preparation for Christ and the Church, God speaks thus through the prophets: "The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Juda. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant, and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will

make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from the least to the greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evil doing and remember their sin no more'.¹

Against this Old Testament background of event and prophecy our Lord, and the Church after him and under the inspiration of his Spirit, interpreted the climactic events of his life: his passion, death and resurrection. These events were his exodus² and, in him, the exodus of the future new people of God. In the waters of affliction, in the destroying waters of death which was his 'baptism'³ he would be stripped of the 'flesh of sin' that he had taken upon himself for our redemption; through the rescuing waters of death he would pass to his 'promised land' and his Rest: his glorification with the Father. These were the bitter waters, made sweet for him (and for his people) by his loving obedience to the Father. His death was his desert, too, and the trial beyond all other trials, for the there entered into conflict with Satan who had tested him in the desert, had been vanquished and had departed from him, but only for a time.⁴

In his death, Paschal and Covenant sacrifice together found their fulfilment. He was the Paschal Lamb who was slain in order that the condemning judgment of God might pass by his people, sparing them and setting them free.⁵ By the Body given for them and the Blood shed for them, they are cleansed and saved.

He, who in his very self was the Covenant (God and man in unalterable union of being and mind and heart, in mutual love and boundless fidelity), was also the sacrificial victim of the new Covenant. This is stated in the institution of the Eucharist. The accent in the two basic accounts of Institution, however, differs somewhat, so that the two traditions complement and illumine one another. According to Matthew and Mark, the blood Christ shed on the Cross, the life he gave out of love for men and in loving obedience to the Father, effectively established the bond of community and friendship between God and men. What had been desired and prefigured at Sinai is here reality. There, Moses, leader

¹ Jer 31, 31-34. Cf. also Ezek 36, 23b-28.

² Jn 13, 1.

³ Cf. Mk 10, 38 ff; Lk 12, 50.

⁴ Cf. Jn 14, 30-31; Lk 4, 1-13.

⁵ Cf. 1 Cor 5, 7.

of the people, had poured out the blood of animals on the altar (symbol of God's presence) and on the people, signifying the Hebrews' desire to enter into vital community with God. Here Christ, both God and man, at once altar and people, sheds his own blood in sacrifice, not simply symbolizing a desire to enter into holy union with God, but effectively passing through death to the total glorification, the total 'spiritualisation' or 'en-Spiriting' of his humanity, and thus to the completion, on every level of his being, of the union with God which was his birthright. In the account of Luke and Paul, allusion is made rather to the new Covenant of Jeremias.¹ The new Covenant is not simply 'another' Covenant. It is qualitatively different, transcending the old, fulfilling the purpose of the old by the achievement of a new and greater purpose. It effected in an undreamt-of way what the old covenant had tried to make a vital reality in the life of Israel: that the Lord should be Israel's God, and Israel his people. The Servant of Jahweh, who is himself a covenant for all the peoples of the earth,² brings the new Covenant into being in a way that Jeremiah had not suspected; his own expiatory and sacrificial death brought into full oneness with the Father his own humanity and, with it and in the power of his world-embracing love, all the sons of Adam as well, made now the Israel of God.

It was thus that the Church, guided by Christ's words and inspired by his Spirit who interpreted to her the meaning and movement of the Old Testament, understood Christ's redemptive work: as his exodus, as his return to the Father from the world of sin. But what was true of Christ was true also of the Church herself. For it was not only he in his private person, so to speak, who returned to God. It was all humanity in him, and, above all, the Church, as the Body with the Head, the Bride with the Spouse.

The Church has been conscious from the beginning, as the New Testament shows, that she is the new Israel, the people of the new Covenant instituted by Christ's death. She has inherited the vocation of Israel: to be a '*chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people*'³ that you may proclaim the perfections of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light – you who in times past were not a people, but now are the people of God; who had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy'.⁴ The Church is in the world as the people of God, a 'sign raised up among

¹ Jer 31a, 31 ff.

² Isai 42, 6.

³ Cf. Exod 19, 5–6.

⁴ 1 Pet 2, 9–10.

the nations',¹ set apart for His service alone, called to make of her life a spiritual sacrifice² and an unending worship in Christ of the Father, 'to the praise of the splendid blessing He has given us through His beloved one.'³

As in Christ, so in the Church, the prefigurative realities of the Old Testament are transcended in being fulfilled. The holiness and consecration of the Church go far beyond anything the Old Testament dreamed of. For, besides the visible bonds that set her apart from the world, the spiritual seal set upon the souls of her members makes her unalterably the 'community of saints', and the one Spirit who dwells in those alive in Christ makes her holy with the holiness of God himself. She is called in her members not only to 'follow the ways of Yahweh' but to walk in the footsteps of God made man, himself her Way. Her love for God and men wells up from the indwelling Spirit of God. The compassion that she shows to men, even as it has been shown to her, is not limited to the ills that pursue men in this world, but reaches beyond the gates of eternity to her children in the other world.

If the Church has inherited the vocation of Israel, she has also inherited the life-form of Israel. She is the people of the exodus, a people in pilgrimage through the desert of the world to the land of promise, to 'the Sabbath-Rest of the people of God'.⁴

Nowhere has the Church given clearer expression to her consciousness of her own and her children's status as 'strangers and pilgrims',⁵ her self-understanding based on the exodus, than in the Easter Vigil. During this night, this 'vigil of vigils', she experiences most deeply her own being and sums up the meaning of her long journey through history. With St. Augustine she says of herself: '... the whole time of this world passes like a night, and the Church keeps watch until the Lord comes, her eyes turned in faith to the Scriptures that are lamps shining in the darkness'.⁶ In the liturgy of the vigil the Church expresses to her children both the meaning of redemption and the meaning of their baptism and Christian existence. It is to the typology of the exodus, above all, that she turns.

At the climax of the *Lucernarium*, or lamp-lighting service, stands the hymn of praise to Christ the Light, symbolised by the Paschal Candle. In the *Exultet* the Church celebrates the night of redemption (the death and resurrection of Christ are seen as a single mystery

¹ Isai 11, 12.

² Cf. 1 Pet 2, 4-5.

³ Eph 1, 6.

⁴ Heb 4, 9.

⁵ 1 Pet 4, 11.

⁶ *Sermo in vigiliis paschae*, 1, 684-5.

which was completed in the night between Saturday and Sunday). She celebrates it as 'this night', for the redemptive mystery exerts its saving influence in the baptism of new Christians and in the Mass of the Resurrection.

The Vigil proper consists of readings and prayers. These, once again, situate the redemptive act of Christ and the communication of redemption to new believers through baptism, in the perspective of the *magnalia Dei* in the Old Testament. Redemption (and baptism) is a recreation of man (first reading), his liberation from the land of slavery (second reading), his purification and installation under the protecting love of the Lord of the Vineyard (third reading and canticle), and his commitment to the faithful following of God, the Just, the Faithful, the Holy One, under the leadership of Joshua, the 'Saviour', in all the trials and temptations that will mark his journey through the desert to the promised land (fourth reading and canticle). The prayer that follows each reading helps to bring out its basic lesson, though it does not exhaust the content of the reading. Most significant is the prayer that follows the second reading. 'God, Your ancient wonders we see splendidly repeated even in our own times, for what You did once with show of might for a single people in freeing them from oppression in Egypt, You now do for the salvation of the nations in the waters of regeneration. Grant, then, that all the world may become sons of Abraham and share the noble lot of Israel'.

Baptism is many things: purification, destruction of the bonds of death, rebirth, illumination of soul, the gift of eternal joy, priestly anointing with Christ. But all these are facets of the passage of man from 'this world' (i. e. from the domination by sin, the flesh and death, that characterises the fallen world of man and indeed even of subhuman creation, and is the mark of its separation from God) to 'the world to come', in which man will be wholly God's and will fulfil, down to the totally purified and totally God-illuminated depths of his being, his great vocation: to be unto the praise of the glory of God. In the sacramental mystery of baptism, where the dying and rising Christ assimilates man to Himself in His passage to the Father, a man passes, even though he yet lives on earth, from 'this world' to the 'world to come'. He has entered already into the future world; he is seated with Christ in the heavens¹ and his life is hidden with Christ in God.² He now belongs to 'the

¹ Eph 2, 16.

² Col 3, 3.

Church of the firstborn who are enrolled in the heaven'.¹ So much is this so that the child dying after baptism or the adult dying with his baptismal innocence completely unstained passes immediately to the vision of God.

But though all this is sacramentally effected in baptism, God's providence calls upon man to ratify, by his own grace-aided efforts, what God has done for him and to him in making him a member of Christ. He must become what he is, must make the sacramental transformation of his own soul by grace a reality through all the levels of his being and in all the sectors of his life. He has been freed from Egypt. Now he must live in the desert and make his way through it, 'hastening to enter into the Rest',² responding to the divine call that always comes 'Today' to him as it did to the Israelite of old,³ and making daily the gift of himself to God that he made first in his baptism.

Before speaking further of this completion of the Christian's exodus, we ought to attend to a second aspect of baptism. Baptism marks the beginning of man's pilgrimage to eternity, but no man goes on this journey alone. He goes with Christ and with the Church of Christ. For when he is reborn, he is born to the Church, Christ's bride and the mother of the children of God, and he becomes one of her family. It is with her that 'we seek for the city that is to come.'⁴

Thus, it was not the exodus typology alone which enabled the Church of the New Testament to understand her own existence and her sacraments. Or rather, there was a further element introduced into the exodus typology by the prophets, which likewise gave the Church insight into her own being. For the prophets, Israel from its desert days on had been not only the people and children of Jahweh; it had also been the bride of Jahweh. In like fashion, the Church of the new Covenant understood herself to be not only the people of Christ and God, born of the side of Christ on Calvary, but the bride of Christ as well. She had been born from his side as the new Eve from the new Adam, to be his bride and the mother of all the faithful. In each generation the Church would be born anew in new children of God, and these in turn would form part of that people of God which is the bride of God in Christ and the mother of other children. The faithful love of those in the Church who are vitally united to Christ responds to his redemptive love and

¹ Heb 12, 23.

² Heb 4, 11.

³ Cf. Heb 31, 7-4, 11, and Deuteronomy *passim*.

⁴ Heb 13, 15.

becomes fruitful, through baptism, in new generations of Christians.

This ecclesial aspect of baptism and this bridal role of the Church in the sacrament dominates the blessing of the font in the Easter Vigil. The Church's spousal union with Christ is there presented with a wealth of imagery that mediates a deep theological understanding of the trite phrase 'holy mother Church'. No paraphrase can replace the reading and meditating of these prayers, and only the main development of themes is here indicated.

In an introductory prayer by the priest for the divine help in the ministerial action to follow, the general theme of the whole blessing is enunciated: the mystery of the font, the womb of the Church, made fecund by the Spirit that it may bring forth children to God.

The mystery of the font is at the same time a 'mystery of God's faithful devotion' (*mysteria pietatis tuae*). For the font is fruitful and the pouring of water produces divine life only because God is faithful to the promise He made long ago to form for himself a people. The promise, even in its explicit form to Abraham and the patriarchs after him, had not been fully understood until its fulfilment in the new Covenant. Much less had there been full understanding of the foreshadowings of the baptismal waters. Now, possessing the reality, we can look back and see how God had anticipated in symbol the sacrament in which the great purification accomplished in Christ's redemptive death would be brought to the individual believer, and in which the new people of God would be born. The preface for the blessing of the font begins with a paradigm and prayer, a litany-like evocation of some of the figures wherein God had foreshadowed the sacrament of baptism. By the creative brooding of the Spirit over the waters of chaos at the beginning, he had fore-shadowed the Spirit's fecundating of the waters of baptism, and had hinted at the new creature that would emerge from them. In the destroying yet fruitful waters of the deluge, from which the sinful earth emerged in pristine cleanness, he had foreshadowed baptismal regeneration in which he would purify interiorly from sin and give new and eternal life.

There follows a petition for the sanctification of the font: God is asked to unite Christ, through his Spirit, to the Church in fruitful union, in order that children of God may come forth from her womb, the font.

And after an exorcism over the water that it may be holy and purifying and a source of divine life, the blessing proper is pronounced. Here once again the Church's prayer harks back to the figures in which God had foreshadowed baptism. The various prefigurings bring

home to us, better than more abstract and technical descriptions, the many-sided reality which is the simple act of baptism, the many effects it has which are not all expressed in the formula of baptism. But in reading this prayer we ought to be on our guard against trying to see mirrored in each figure some special aspect of baptism. Several of the figures are, in fact, figures of the Eucharist rather than of baptism. The intention of the prayer is simply to arouse in us a sense of wonder at 'God's creature, the water', and at its role in the history of God's dealings with men. It is to this end that in the font the waters of baptism are seen in the perspective of all the waters that felt the touch of God in the Old Testament or of Christ the Son in the New: the waters of creation, the four rivers of paradise, the bitter waters of Mara made sweet by God, and the water that flowed from the rock for his thirsting people; the water changed into wine at Cana, the waters on which Christ walked and in which he was baptised, the water finally in which he bade his disciples baptise.

Towards the end of the blessing, the Spirit of God is directly invoked and prayed to descend upon the font with his sanctifying power. The point of the whole blessing, and of the invocation of the Spirit in particular, is not that the Spirit should in some gross fashion come to dwell in the water. The blessing rather gives expression to the spiritual event which will take place at the moment of baptism itself, when by the sanctifying power of the Spirit the sacramental waters are rendered fruitful and the Church gives birth to new children.

As Christ's death and resurrection were his exodus from this world and his entrance into his promised land, so baptism is our exodus with Christ and our entrance into the life of the world to come. For in this symbolico-effective action of purification and rebirth, the sanctifying power of Christ's return to the Father takes possession of us. Yet, as was pointed out earlier, our exodus must also become a personally affirmed reality that permeates and transforms all levels of our being.

In the night of the Easter Vigil, therefore, the Church bids us sharpen our consciousness of this basic meaning of our time on earth. After deepening, through the prayers, blessings, chants and readings of the Vigil, our understanding of redemption and of our baptism, we are urged by the Church to renew our baptismal promises. The renunciation of Satan and the self-dedication in loving faith to the Father, that we made at baptism, were indeed effective in our souls by the grace of the sacrament. But they were also a commitment for

the future, a vocation based on the gift of God then given. Having been made new men by God, we must 'be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and put on the new man, which has been created according to God in justice and holiness and truth'.¹ Thus the renewal of our baptismal promises can be made with special fervour during the Easter Vigil, but it needs also to be made daily.

Such a renewal of baptismal commitment, in whatever words we may express it, is at bottom our renewed adhesion, by faith and love, to Christ our Lord in his passage to the Father through his sacrificial death and his resurrection. His death was a sacrifice because it was the expression and realisation of complete self-dispossession and complete self-giving to the Father in loving obedience. Death for him was the gateway through which he passed in order to be 'made sacred' (*sacrificium*), in order, that is, to be totally permeated in his humanity by divinity. And because the love that animated him in his dying was so unreserved, so infinitely acceptable to the Father, it brought him to the union he desired: in his resurrection, the Father's answer to his yearning love, his humanity was completely vitalised by the transforming Spirit of God.

It is to such love that we are committed in baptism. But Christ has not left us to the resources, however great, of purely interior faith. Before entering upon his own exodus from this world he gave us the Eucharist. In the Mass it would be possible for his Church through the centuries, and for each of his followers, to renew their adhesion to the covenant, not once a year as the Jew did in the Passover sacrifice, but daily. Christ himself would be the priest and victim in the Eucharist, and the immense love that inspired him in his dying would be offered again to the Father. Daily the Church would be able to stir up in herself the ardent love for God that is her great bridal gift from Christ. Daily she would affirm with Christ that she is the people of God, and anticipate in the sacramental mystery her definitive passage from this world when she reaches the fullness of the stature of Christ. Daily she would in desire pass from this world to the Father, and 'return from the abyss as one living', bringing back to her children in their pilgrimage the grace of transfiguring love.

It is in the power of this love that we shall conquer the world, and enter daily more deeply into God, until the time of sacraments and faith passes, and 'the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts'.²

¹ Eph 4, 23-24.

² Pet 1, 19.