

THE LORD'S FREEDMAN

By BARNABAS M. AHERN

*The man who as a slave
received the call to be a Christian
is the Lord's freedman.¹*

READING the news magazine *Time* often brings a mood of depression. Reports of tragedy and rumours of war can be troubling enough unless a reader has already grown, numb under their frequency. The really perennial blight however, is *Time's* weekly witness to the emptiness of human life. Often the drab picture of frustration is heightened by the glittering frame of wealth or talent which surrounds it. A recent column sketched the career of a brilliant concert artist. Whatever his music may have been, the story of his life was thrown off key by the jarring *leitmotiv* of his own confession: 'It is music alone that has *dragged* me through life'. While his career soared, the artist himself felt only the downward pull of boredom.

Characters like these are a sad commentary on being merely human. They are always with us. The history of man as man follows a downward curve. It has to; for the merely human is an area where the 'prince of this world' holds sway with a pull of gravity which men as individuals or as groups are often too weak to resist.

MAN'S STORY IN A PARABLE

The Gospel has sketched an acted parable which beats out this truth with staccato insistence.² The story tells of a real event, but its deft emphasis transforms the incident into a saga of strength confronting weakness. In the land of the Gerasenes Jesus comes face to face with the sad plight of a man bent to the ground in this 'world of darkness'. St. Luke describes the sequel in four dramatic scenes of descent and deterioration.

The first scene centres in the demoniac, a weak human already enchained and dragged down by the power of Satan; 'Many a time the devil had seized him with chains and fetters; but each time he broke loose, and with the devil in charge made off to the solitary

¹ 1 Cor 7, 22.

² Lk 8, 26-39.

places'.¹ The second scene unmasks the inherent weakness of Satan's pride. Like a pitiful fool he lifts his head high, boasts of his strength and brags of his name, 'Legion'. The next moment, however, he is forced by the very presence of divine strength to reveal the bent of his being. He cringes with fear of returning to the depth where he belongs and begs the Strong One 'not to banish him to the abyss'.² The downward drive of the 'prince of this world' takes shape and colour in the third scene. When Jesus with contempt lets him work his will, Satan and his minions leave their victim to seek refuge appropriately in a herd of unclean swine. The dumb beasts cannot resist the pull of gravity. Instantly, 'the herd rushed down the cliff into the lake and were drowned'.

All is not over. The last act of the drama is more tragic than any of the rest. Men of the countryside, though witnesses of Jesus' saving power, cling to their feeble humanness and turn away from the Strong One who could lift them up. As the swine bearing the demon plunged into the sea, these men follow the same headlong course: 'The whole population of the Gergasene district asked him to depart from them, for they were in the grip of great fear'.³

HISTORY HUMAN AND DIVINE

The story is a saga of all merely human history where man as man tends always to dissolution. St. Paul has described this descent in the darkest pages of his epistles,⁴ and thus passes judgement on it, 'The bent of mere humanness is death'.⁵ It is significant that the inspired writers never waste a word of praise on men who are merely human. Jeroboam II, one of the most successful of Israel's kings, is allotted no more than seven short verses.⁶ The course of a weakling rushing down to Sheol held no interest for the writers of the Bible. In their eyes the only history worth telling is the salvation history which God has created. Here alone man stands upright and rises upward to the God of heaven who created him.

This true 'history' is the dominant theme in Luke's drama. Here the description of weakness is only a foil for the main theme of strength. Christ appears in each scene as the one whom St. Luke loves to call *epistates* (the Master who 'stands over'). He is a figure of majesty, untouched by the pull of gravity and powerful

¹ Lk 8, 29.

² Lk 8, 31.

³ Lk 8, 37.

⁴ Rom 1, 18 - 3, 20.

⁵ Rom 8, 6.

⁶ 2 Kg 14, 23-29.

to save even the weakest from its peril. His very presence is a torment to the demon; his word liberates and brings peace to the poor sufferer, infusing strength and enkindling in him a desire to remain always in the presence of the strong Son of God. His request to accompany Jesus is not the clinging of weakness, but the ardour of new-found loyalty. When, therefore, his plea is refused, he becomes instead a zealous apostle and 'goes all over the town spreading the news of what Jesus had done for him'.¹

CHRIST THE FREE MAN

Every page of the gospel is alive with this vital *élan*. Jesus is everywhere free and masterful like a giant running his course. Though himself the true Son of Man, obediently subject to the weakness and limitations of human life, he is also always master. Intransigently he casts aside the man-made rules which shackled his people to an earth-bound view of life and of God. He teaches instead life-giving principles which lift up the whole man to the perfect liberty of a son of God. His hearers sensed this masterful liberty in the lessons which he shared with them. 'The people were astounded at his teaching; unlike their own teachers he taught them with a note of authority'.²

He stood a free man before the law precisely because his character and conduct were totally free of sin. His life conformed inwardly and outwardly to the will of his Father. Though himself human and though living in the midst of humanness, his will, like a bar of steel, never bent a hair's breadth to the omnipresent downward pull. His victory over Satan in the desert struck the keynote of his whole life – calm intransigence in resisting evil. His worst enemies could find no real flaw in him; the demons themselves cringed before him uttering the cry which even their warped will could not stifle, 'I know who you are – the Holy One of God'.³

He was free, above all, of death. It is true that like every man he died physically. But death in the Bible is something more than a biological fact. It is the last step in man's downward descent, the seal and consummation of final separation from God. Always united to God, Christ could never experience this aspect of death. Master of his soul, perfect victor over sin, devoted Son of the Father, he would find in physical dissolution the way to true life and the door of joyous return to his Father.

¹ Lk 8, 39.

² Mt 7, 28-29.

³ Mk 1, 24.

A SAVIOUR IN THE WORLD

All during the days of his earthly life Christ walked the ways of men with the strength and uplifted head of a free man. His was the perfect liberty of the true Son of God. His too was the glorious task of setting men free. He announced this mission in the synagogue of Nazareth when He identified himself as the Messiah foretold by Isaiah: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me . . . He has sent me . . . to proclaim release for prisoners, To let the broken victims go free, To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.¹ The gospels bear constant witness to this messianic mission. On every page we read of men and women saved from human weakness by the strong Christ. It would be difficult to imagine Zaccheus, or the forgiven adulteress, or the sinful woman of Simon's banquet, going back to their old ways of sin after receiving the pardon of Christ.

It was the same with the recipient of his physical cures; they too shared the life and liberty of salvation history. Under the influence of a Greek dichotomy of man into body and soul we have lost the healthy Hebrew concept of human unity and wholeness, and so have come to regard these miracles as merely physical benefits. They were instead true messianic gifts, gifts of saving for the whole man. If blind eyes were opened, the whole man saw God in a new light; if crippled limbs were straightened, the whole man was made strong to walk in the ways of God; if men rose from the dead, they received strength to lead a new life in the spirit.

Our Lord's earthly mission was therefore a liberation of his fellow men from the fatal burden of their own humanness and a strengthening of them for heavenly life as sons of God. A man of power, giving power: this was the dominant impression in his preaching: 'You know about Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him'.¹

A SAVIOUR IN HEAVEN

His days upon earth, however, were but the beginning of the saving mission which he entered upon at the moment of his resurrection. Now all earthly bonds were broken – bonds of time and place and of life in weak flesh. The power of the Father became all

¹ Lk 4, 18–19.

² Acts 10, 38.

his to use; the Spirit of the Father, all his to give. It was this truth which burst upon the Apostles at Pentecost. For too long attention has centred on what was merely external in this event, fire and tongues and roaring wind. Preoccupation with these symbols has obscured the inward meaning of it all, the God-given conviction which burned into the hearts of the apostles, the divine revelation which roared through their souls. In the light of Pentecost Jesus came to them in a new way. Now for the first time they recognized fully who he was and understood truly the meaning of his resurrection: the man Jesus, their friend, had come to life with boundless power to be their Saviour because he is their God.

We can only guess from afar the soul-stirring impact of the apostles' new knowledge of Christ. To the onlookers they seemed like drunken men; and they *were* drunk with a joy no man could take from them. They knew now that Jesus would always be Lord of all, powerful as God to save and to strengthen them through his Holy Spirit. Peter tried to explain this in the first words he was able to utter: 'The Jesus we speak of has been raised by God, as we can all bear witness. Exalted thus by the right hand of God, he received the Holy Spirit from the Father, as was promised, and all that you now see and hear flows from him'.² From that day on the apostles would know only one word: 'Jesus is risen!' It welled up from inward conviction compelling them to speak with all the power of love. The 'tongues of fire' were perfect symbols of the Spirit given them. Ever after, illumined by his indwelling presence, they spoke with *parresia* (fearless freedom); nothing could check the flow of flaming words from hearts brimming over with love.

SALVATION FOR THE CHURCH

Everywhere they went the apostles preached Christ as Lord and Saviour. What he had done in a limited way for a few men during his earthly life he was now consummating in a perfect way for all men through the power of his Holy Spirit. Life in the early Church brought daily experience of this. Conversions frequently renewed the remarkable incidents of Pentecost. Men came alive with an awareness of Christ which filled them with so much love and insight that they too, hearts pounding with joy, spoke with the gift of tongues.³ Lives were transformed under the impact of the new

¹ Acts 2, 32-33.

² Cf. Acts 4, 31; 10, 44-46.

faith. Timid and weak men became fearless apostles. Men of diverse loyalties and various backgrounds were drawn into bonds of love by their common faith. In the little community the strength and goodness of Christ lived again. 'The whole body of the believers was united in heart and soul'.¹ 'With one mind . . . they shared their meals with unaffected joy, as they praised God and enjoyed the favour of the whole people'.² This new way of life was a fact for all to see. United to the risen Lord the Christians were vital with a dynamic power which lifted them above the pull of earth, the tyranny of self-centredness, and the frustration of mere humanness. The day would come, however, when God's gift, none the less real, would no longer manifest itself in sign and wonder, in the tongue of inspired utterance and in the strength of healing power. It would be needful then that men should understand the true nature of God's gift if they were to co-operate with it to the full. It was Paul who translated this new life into terms of lasting principle. Though enlightened by his own experiences he did far more than write a transcript of merely subjective mysticism. His letters deal with the reality of Christianity itself, the objective gifts which God bestows on every believer. If he speaks of himself, it is because he knows that the 'I' of Paul is the 'I' of every believer.

THE ROLE OF THE SPIRIT

Basic to his thought is the truth of the apostolic *kerygma* that Jesus was truly the Messiah throughout his earthly life, a man 'anointed by the Spirit'.³ The story of Christ in the gospels mentions the Holy Spirit but rarely. It was sufficient to relate, as all the evangelists have done, his all-important role in the messianic investiture of Jesus at the banks of the Jordan. John the evangelist emphasizes this connection by recording the word of God to the Baptist: 'He upon whom you will see the Spirit descending, and abiding upon Him, He it is who will baptize with the Holy Spirit'.⁴

The influence of the Holy Spirit upon Christ was truly lifelong and intimate. It was he who filled the heart of Christ with the love which prompted him to desire and to work for the salvation of men. Love was the Spirit's best gift to him, the gift that strengthened and sustained him, and held him upright amid all the weakness

¹ Acts 4, 32.

² Acts 2, 46.

³ Acts 10, 38.

⁴ Jn 1, 33.

and suffering of his own humanness. Man's refusal would thwart his efforts but never his love. At the end it swept him into a maelstrom of sorrow and death. But 'deep waters cannot quench love, nor floods sweep it away'.¹ With joy and peace he surrendered to the bitter, raging waters, confident that they would wash him onto the shore of eternity there to accomplish perfectly the saving work for which he had come. Like Daniel's Son of Man, he would draw near to the Ancient One, and the love of his heart would grow strong with the power and dominion of the Father: 'I shall draw all men to myself, when I am lifted up from the earth'.²

THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

His expectation met with perfect fulfilment. Death broke the tie which bound him to earthly 'flesh', to the solidarity of life in this 'world', with its inherent weakness, mortality and distance from God. Through resurrection he entered upon an entirely new life in which he would give full play to the love and power which is his as messianic Son of God. As Paul explains, nothing could be more definitive, nothing more fruitful, than the death-resurrection of Christ. Through death he escaped forever from the bonds of the merely human; through resurrection he began a new life with perfect power as God to share it with his followers: 'As in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made to live'.³

This new life of the risen Saviour gave full play to the exercise of his messianic mission. He who had constantly lived under the influence of the Spirit while on earth now shares the Father's power to bestow the Spirit on those who are united to him through faith and baptism. This gift of the Spirit created Christianity and gives it present reality. For it is precisely in sharing the Spirit of Jesus that men become 'one person' with Him.⁴ 'In one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body of Christ'.⁵

Paul emphasizes this truth all through his letters. From his first to his last epistle he repeats that 'God has given His Spirit to us'⁶ and that 'the Spirit dwells in us'.⁷ For Paul the presence of the Spirit is the dynamic power of the New Covenant.⁸ It is indeed significant that his richest teaching on the Holy Spirit occurs in the two epistles (Romans and Galatians) in which he deals with the

¹ Cant 8, 7.

² Jn 12, 32.

³ 1 Cor 15, 22.

⁴ Cf. Gal 3, 28.

⁵ 1 Cor 12, 13.

⁶ 1 Thess 4, 8.

⁷ 2 Tim 1, 14.

⁸ Cf. Ezek 36, 22-32.

contrast between Judaism and Christianity. The transformation of man from the slavery of mere humanness to the glory of divine sonship: all this Paul attributes to the fact that 'God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of His Son, crying Abba! Father!'¹ This word of the Apostle anticipates all that can be written on the wonder of the gift which Christ bestows. In sharing with us his own Spirit he makes us like himself, true sons of God.

THE LOVE OF SONS AND BROTHERS

Paul does not analyze the intimate nature of the change which takes place in man; he has not elaborated a scholastic theology of grace. Hebrew through and through, he concentrates on what is existential and functional in divine realities. Though fully aware that man is totally transformed he emphasizes rather the dynamic change which the Holy Spirit produces in man's attitudes and actions. His whole being comes alive with *agape* (love).

First of all, the light of the Spirit brings him to understand as never before how much God has shown for him through Christ Jesus: 'God's love for us is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us . . . For God has proven His love for us, because when as yet we were sinners, Christ died for us'.²

This awareness of God's love creates an entirely new attitude towards him. Whereas before man lived in fear of his own unworthiness now through the light of the Spirit he sees in himself a new character. If he has cost the death of God's Son and if both Father and Son willed it so, then he must be very dear to the Father, loved in a way like Christ himself. God has even given the Holy Spirit to make this truth crystal clear: 'To prove that you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying Abba! Father!'³ Deep in our hearts, 'the Holy Spirit is always giving testimony to our spirit that we are sons of God'.⁴ This new awareness of sonship forms a correlative attitude towards one's fellow men. If God has so loved everyone that each must look upon him as a Father, then all men are brothers to be loved with the very *agape* with which God cherishes them. As St. John expresses it, 'If God has so loved us, we in turn are bound to love one another'.⁵

¹ Gal 4, 6.

² Rom 5, 5; 8-9.

³ Gal 4, 6.

⁴ Rom 8, 16.

⁵ 1 Jn 4, 11.

A NEW CENTRE OF GRAVITY

The work of the Holy Spirit, therefore, is to fill man with love: 'The fruit of the Spirit is *agape*'.¹ Awareness of God's love for man, a compelling urge to love God in return, a deep love for all God's other sons: this is Christian life, a life ruled by love. Dwelling in man, the Holy Spirit leads him to live more and more in this spirit of sonship: 'Whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are sons of God'.² The Christian who cherishes these convictions and gives full rein to these attitudes is, in the vocabulary of St. Paul, a 'spiritual man', a son guided and inspired and strengthened by the Spirit of God. He is shaped to the likeness of Christ who lived as a son and followed the Spirit as guide all the days of His life. Paul concludes his long discussion of the Spirit's work in man with the single summary sentence, 'God ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the eldest among a large family of brothers'.³ All this shifts the centre of gravity from earth and the self-centredness of merely human life to heaven and the God-centredness of spiritual life. 'They who live on the level of our lower nature have their outlook formed by it, and that spells death; but those who live on the level of the spirit have the spiritual outlook, and that is life and peace'.⁴

The phrase of St. Ignatius of Antioch is particularly apt: *Amor meus pondus meum* (The love of Christ is the centre of gravity for me). A new course of life opens out through the action of God's Spirit. It is a way free of earthiness and leading upwards, a way where one walks buoyantly with the love of a son for his Father and of a brother for all men. Entering on this way through Baptism, the Christian shares fully in the redemptive mysteries of Christ's death-resurrection. Urged by the love which the Spirit infuses the 'spiritual man' turns completely away from the pull of earth to be drawn only by love of the Father: 'When we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus we were baptized into his death. By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendour of the Father, so also we might set our feet upon the new path of life'.⁵

FREEDOM FROM LAW

This new life is a way of perfect liberty. For who is more free

¹ Gal 5, 22.

² Rom 8, 14.

³ Rom 8, 29.

⁴ Rom 8, 5-6.

⁵ Rom 6, 3-4.

than the man who loves everything he must do? Paul delights in this theme and develops its every aspect. For him the Christian is totally free of law, not only the law of Moses but of every law of earth. Whatever restrictions law could put upon him, whatever good it enjoins, all this the Christian *wants* to do – and much more. His life is guided and inspired by the 'law of the Spirit'¹ which enjoins everything contained in human law with requirements much more exacting. It is not written on parchment but lies deep in the human heart. It is the compelling urge of a son's love to do everything possible to please the Father.

A slave works because he has to. He carries out directions and discharges duties for fear of the lash. He feels always the attraction to be on his own and to work for his own. That is why his service is often half-hearted and his work negligent. How different it is with a son or a wife in the home. Their tasks are often the same as those of the slave; they follow the same round of duties. But the home is theirs; the father and the family are their loved ones. And so they put their heart into every duty, their full strength into every task. No mere servant can match the thoroughness or devotedness of their work. Yet they could never think of this life as the observance of law; it is all a spontaneous act of love. This is Paul's perfect Christian. Full of the Holy Spirit he is a true son, a man in love with God and with his brethren. His goodness of life, therefore, is not the hard labour of a slave but the joyous expression of love: 'The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these'.²

FREEDOM FROM SIN

A habit of half-heartedness is impossible for the son who follows faithfully the lead of the Spirit. St. Paul insists that such a one is free of sin. In this world, it is true, man will always feel the weight of his own flesh: 'Nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it'.³ But when God is the focal point of all one's interest, love gives power to resist the downward pull. It makes the Christian strong with the strength of Him who said, 'Which one of you can convict me of sin?'⁴

This double power of love, to free from sin and to make one like Christ, becomes crystal clear in Paul's description of what love

¹ Rom 8, 2.

² Gal 5, 22-23.

³ Gal 5, 17.

⁴ Jn 8, 46.

really means. In describing the *agape* of the Christian he really sketches a profile of Christ's love and of his sinlessness: Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other men's sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance'.¹ Love is the perfect preservative against sin: 'If you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfil the desires of your lower nature'.²

FREEDOM FROM DEATH

For the true Christian death, too, loses all power. In a certain sense the son of God, like Christ himself, will never die. For him 'life is changed, not taken away'.³ Death as a physical dissolution is the common fate of all mankind; no one escapes it. But death as a separation from God can never touch the man who loves. The very breakdown of his body only intensifies his break with sin and his wholehearted cleaving to God: 'Though our outward humanity is in decay, yet day by day we are inwardly renewed'.⁴

The life of the son of God who is led by the Spirit is more a rising than a dying. All during his life emotions, imagination, feelings and nerves are being purified, quieted and perfected by the gentle influence of love. The body grows weaker but the whole man gains ever greater serenity and self-control. His bodily resurrection will be just the last step in a transformation which the Holy Spirit has been working in him all the days of his earthly life: 'If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells within you, then the God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give new life to your mortal bodies through his indwelling Spirit'.⁵

PERFECT SONSHIP

From first to last Christian life is the masterpiece of the Spirit of Jesus. It is he who gives the very love which inspires a weak human being to live and to act as a true Son of God. Through his vital touch the Person of Christ lives again in millions of men and women whom 'he is not ashamed to call his brethren'.⁶

All are children of the same Father. All walk the same highway of love. All are the world's true free men; for 'if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free'.⁷

¹ 1 Cor 13, 4-7.

² Gal 5, 16.

³ Preface of the Mass for the Dead.

⁴ 2 Cor 4, 16.

⁵ Rom 8, 11.

⁶ Heb 2, 11.

⁷ Jn 8, 36.