

THE FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISE

By DENNIS J. McCARTHY

CHRIST is the ultimate gift of God. All history before him was a preparation for his coming, and after him true life is to live his life in the Church. It is Christ who has brought the final word of teaching and the definitive act of salvation. That is to say, he is the climax of the long history of salvation which is the Bible. This history is not a simple evolution, the product of forces immanent in the process; it is planned and directed by God. We can look at the plan from a number of points of view; as enlightenment, for instance: the Bible is the record of man's growing realization of God, in which revelation adds idea to idea, image to image until it culminates in the coming of the Word who is Truth itself; or as apologetics: the Bible is also a record of prophecies, a growing description of the one who is to come: the credentials, so to speak, by which the Christ is recognized. However, it will not do to limit our view to this more or less apologetic aspect of the Scriptures. If we wish to understand the whole, we must grasp the basic process by which God governed history. That process is the sequence of promise and fulfilment, of God's free promises and the loving care with which he surrounds his people, to make them ready to receive what he has offered. In other words, we are to consider the fidelity of God, and the fidelity which he expects from his people in return.

The final proof of the divine fidelity was the Incarnation. Unexpected though it was, it was still the fulfilment of God's promise, a fulfilment beyond the dreams of the ancients. The Jews hoped for a Messiah, a king who could restore the material and moral prosperity of the Chosen People. But that God should become man to save man from his sins and so begin the final age of the world, this was a fulfilment which surpassed all promises. Christ redeems all the promises of God and manifests perfectly his Father's unchanging will to save; a will faithful in the face of man's own infidelity. As the first preaching of the Church loved to point out,¹ Christ is the

¹ Acts 2, 14-36.

fulfilment of the prophecies; but he himself is also the last of the line of the prophets, that succession of men who were the instruments with which God sought to guide, to care for, to save his people.¹ The prophet of old could only announce, blame, instruct; he could not change the condition of the people. Christ not only taught and admonished as no prophet had yet done; he did not simply call upon men to turn to God. His life, death and resurrection themselves effected this change. In Christ mankind was reconciled radically to God.

The spectacle of the divine fidelity is one that should fill us with awe and wonder. We are perhaps so concerned with our own efforts to be faithful to him that the meaning of the words 'God is faithful in all his works', escapes our notice. We take *his* fidelity for granted. Centuries of speculative thought about the divine attributes may well have taken away much of our awe in the face of the mystery of God. But the reverse is true of the Bible. It began before philosophy, and when the sacred authors consider the virtue of fidelity, it is God who is seen as the principle and the foundation of this as of all other virtues. It is *his* fidelity which endures forever.² The fidelity of man is merely a response to the divine fidelity, and an uncertain one at that. If we are to understand how revolutionary this idea is, that the Deity should bind itself to give good things to men and fulfil the promises which he makes to men, we must try to put ourselves in the context of this revelation. For the people to whom God revealed himself, the whole of life was penetrated by a religion of fear. Nor was this the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom; rather it was irrational terror before the unknown and powerful. In the words of the Babylonian epic, 'The gods are the enemies of man'. The divine was a force to be reckoned with, capitious and maleficent. If it was to be relied on, it must first be controlled. Man must make the first move in order to placate and even to constrain the divine by rite and magic.

This was the environment upon which revelation burst with the promise to Abraham. The choice of the people of the promise began with a pagan in Babylonia.³ And it was not man who constrained God; God bound himself by his promise, and so ended the fear of a capricious divinity. Because of the promise, hope and trust replaced terror. It was God who took the initiative with a magnificent promise, the turning point in the relationship between God and man.

¹ Heb 1, 1-2.

² Ps 116, 2.

³ Jos 24, 14.

For with the promise of blessing upon Abraham, which was to extend not merely to the people of Abraham, but to all nations,¹ the history of man's sinfulness and consequent decline – which is the subject matter of the first chapters of Genesis – ends, and the upward turn begins. The first decisive step in the history of salvation has been taken and it is already a step towards Christ. For according to Paul, the promise made to Abraham looks to Christ.² God has committed himself to man, and his promise will be kept. His loving care will never cease.

At the same time, the promise of God commands an answering fidelity from man. Of this Abraham, the recipient of the first great promise, gives the example. At God's call he abandons home and family to commit himself to the faithful care of God. At the apparent command of Yahweh, Abraham is even ready to offer up Isaac his son, the first fruits of God's promise and of his own hopes. Here is the ideal of the faithful response to God. It explains to us what is involved in the human response to the divine fidelity. It means trust and devotion, something far more than a legal give and take by which Abraham pays a debt and earns further divine help.³ This is clear in the first great gift, the promise itself. God must begin. He must seek out the stranger, the pagan who by definition could not seek him. But even when the relationship has been established through the promise given, it would be wrong to think of it as an obedient response to the divine pledge and gifts, so as to earn further gifts; rather as though man were doing business with money lent to him by God. There is much more to fidelity than this.

For that matter, the use of the word 'faithful' in ordinary language is not limited to the case of a man who fulfils his obligations in strict justice. Just so, the Biblical image of the relationship between man and God is far above that which exists between debtor and creditor. God and his people are likened to husband and wife, to mother and child. Indeed, the very hebrew word for fidelity goes back to a root-word used of a mother holding a child in her arms: surely the perfect human experience of mutual fidelity and trust. And it is to this experience that God appeals: 'Can a woman forget her suckling child, so as not to have pity on the son of her womb? Even though these may forget I will not forget you!'⁴ If God's faithfulness surpasses by far that of the mother's care and love for her child,

¹ Gen 12, 2-3; cp. Acts 3, 25; Gal 3, 8.

² Gal 3, 15 ff.

³ Cf. Rom 4.

⁴ Isai 49, 15.

man's response must go far beyond strict justice. We do not think of the loving care of a mother and the security with which she surrounds her child as earning the child's response. Nor does the child simply merit love and care. Love spontaneous and generous, much more than justice, must characterize the gift and the response. God gives a whole new life whether it be to Abraham, to his people in the Promised Land, to the Church; his gift obviously demands the devotion of the whole person in return.

Of course the ideal was not always achieved. Rather than fidelity God found infidelity. But even this did not cause him to withdraw the promise. Of his promise to David he says: 'If his sons forsake my law . . . I will punish their offence . . . but my kindness I will not withdraw from nor will I be false to my fidelity'.¹ God's promises are absolute; man's infidelity may delay their fulfilment but it cannot prevent it. Indeed the prodigal son, the type of faithless Israel, seems to be the object of an even more special favour. God reveals to his prophet that the demands of Israel for a king is an extreme example of infidelity. Yet he turns the institution of the monarchy into a new and special channel of grace, and endows it with a new and expanded promise, and a pledge of his concern for his people. In its inception, the monarchy was the result of lack of faith in the God who had been guiding his people by a series of leaders, the Judges, raised up at his will. The people sought an authority more human, more stable, a Gentile institution. They rejected God for a human monarch, though he himself was their king.² A sufficiently dubious beginning surely! And the picture was not brightened by the failure of Saul, the first king, to live up to his obligations to God. And yet, under David, the monarchy itself became an object of promise and a source of hope. Nathan's prophecy³ assures the king that it is not he who will build a house (temple) for God, but that God will build a house (dynasty) for him. David's line is guaranteed by the divine promise; indeed, it is itself a promise, for there is more here than the mere satisfaction of dynastic ambitions. This is the first link in the chain which binds the line of David to the Messianic hope. The promise at first embraced the whole nation of Israel, through Abraham. Now it was concentrated in a special way on the family of David. The continuance of his line was a continued fulfilment of the divine promise and the constant pledge of the final gift: the Son of David, the Christ,

¹ Ps 88, 30-33.

² 1 Sam 8, 4-9; 12, 12.

³ 2 Sam 7.

in whom the promise embodied in the prophecy of Nathan was definitively redeemed.

The aspect of the promise which is made manifest in the history of the patriarch Abraham and the royal line of David is that of God committing himself and honouring his commitments: a fidelity which was and is a source of true hope for his people. But the divine fidelity means more than the honouring of a pledge. A faithful friend, a faithful parent surrounds the object of his concern with care, with love, with guidance, even with admonition and chastisement if need be. It is the prophets who furnish a special example of this aspect of the divine fidelity. We tend to think of the prophets as conveying the divine promise. The word 'prophecy' in English means to predict; so that the function of the prophets is normally considered to be merely that of conveying the promise. They, rather than patriarch or king, would seem to be channels of the promise. This is true. But we must not forget that they had another mission, which is in fact revealed in the great bulk of their sayings. As agents of God they were to guide, warn and admonish the people. They were a means by which God cared for his people and tried to keep them in the right path; for even if human infidelity was unable to prevent the ultimate redemption of God's promises, man's failings could retard their fulfilment and multiply suffering. Thus the prophetic ministry is not simply to transmit promise; it is to prepare the way for fulfilment. It is itself a sign of God's continued care, sign which he himself invokes.¹

Moreover, the prophet provides an example of that return of fidelity which God seeks from man: total dedication to the God who promises. Though the prophet does not seek his office and is chosen by God for it, he does respond to the divine call. He is faithful to his mission in spite of personal distaste and fears, in spite of threats and dangers. The whole history of the prophetic movement could be cited to illustrate this. But the most illuminating example is that of Jeremias. There is the divine call at the beginning: 'Before you were born I set you apart, I appointed you a prophet to the nations'.² There is the faithful response even in the face of opposition and suffering. In fulfilling his mission, the prophet was like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,³ but fulfil it he does. Here is man's response to God, faithful acceptance of his vocation, a vocation to save, cost what it may. This is the fidelity which not only

¹ Jer 7, 21-26.

² Jer 1, 5.

³ Jer 11, 19.

pleases God but positively furthers the divine plan.

This we know, since these ideas and images which are revealed in the history of Jeremias have a future. His call from before birth, his patient suffering, are resumed and expanded in the history of the Suffering Servant.¹ This mysterious figure will be called, and his faithful response in the face of suffering and even death will have redemptive value. A typical procedure of revelation this, not to dispose of an idea once for all after its first appearance, but to have a later writer take it up and develop its implications. We have the example of fidelity in the face of suffering in Jeremias; the book of Isaiahs adds the great concept of the expiatory value of suffering and projects into the future the figure upon whom the Lord will lay the iniquity of us all. And the end of the process? How familiar the figure is: he who was designated by God from before birth to a great office, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The prophets are a means used by God in his faithful care of his people. They show forth his fidelity and their response teaches us what man's fidelity must be. It is Christ who crowns the sequence of the prophets. He brings the word of life, he is the faithful one whose life and death are at once God's supreme gift and the perfect example of the fidelity required by God: the perfect fidelity which consists, not merely in teaching and example, but in the effective work of salvation.

As the Suffering Servant, Christ sums up and fulfils a whole line of Biblical tradition. The same is true of other great Biblical themes: Christ is the hoped-for Messias from the line of David; he is the true vine who brings forth the fruits God desires.² All the currents of revelation flow together in him. He fulfils every figure and every promise. He makes manifest the justice of God³ in that he shows forth God's faithful fulfilment of his promise to save. And, as always, the fidelity of God made manifest in him calls for a proportionate response from men. In Christ God has offered life to mankind. Christ is the true vine and his life flows through that extension of himself which is the Church. But he has warned that the branches of the vine must themselves be true. They must live the life offered to them.

Christ has come and fulfilled the promises. He will come again.

¹ Isai 42, 1-9; 49, 1-6; 50, 4-11; 52, 13-53, 12. Cf. Frederick L. Moriarty, *The Suffering Servant*, in *THE WAY*, April 1961, pp. 120-33.

² Jn 15; cp. Isai 5; Jer 2, 20-22.

³ Rom 3, 26.

In the meantime the Church lives a life of fulfilment, for it lives the divine life offered in Christ. But it also lives in expectation; the end has begun but is not yet. The master continues to demand faithful service from his people. But, as we have seen, fidelity and the service which flows from it is self-determined. Every servant of the Lord is free as Christ is free. So the Lord asks: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' Likeness to him is the only true measure of fidelity.

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