

# THE HOLY ONE OF GOD

By PAUL EDWARDS

**T**HEN he left the place, and withdrew to his own countryside, his disciples following him. Here when the sabbath came, he began teaching in the synagogue, and many were astonished when they heard him. How did he come by all this? they asked. What is the meaning of this wisdom that has been given him, of all these wonderful works that are done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon? Do not his sisters live near us? And they had no confidence in him'.<sup>1</sup>

This story of Christ's reception by the people of his own town is at the same time both astonishing and revealing. It is easily credible that during the thirty odd years of the hidden life Our Lord should not have worked a single miracle nor given any hint of his origin or destiny. But how did he conceal the quality of an intellect illuminated by the Divine mind and the temper of a will wielded by a Divine Person? One would have thought that the people of Nazareth in their daily contact with him must have come to realize that this was a man of quite outstanding calibre. But their reaction, 'How did he come by all this?' shows that they had not. So effectively had Christ merged himself in his environment that he seemed to them merely an undistinguished part of it. 'Is not this the carpenter?' Yet not only was the word of the Lord upon the tongue of this commonplace fellow townsman; he was himself the Divine Word.

But the word of the Lord had come to this people's ancestors in quite different fashion:

And now the third day was come, and the morning appeared; and behold thunders began to be heard, and lightning to flash, and a very thick cloud to cover the mount. And the noise of the trumpet sounded exceeding loud, and the people that was in the camp, feared. And when Moses had brought them forth to meet God from the place of the camp they stood at the bottom of the mount . . . And all the mount was terrible . . . And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai in

---

<sup>1</sup> Mt 13, 53-8.

the very top of the mount; and he called Moses unto the top thereof . . . He said unto him; Go down and charge the people; lest they should have a mind to pass the limits to see the Lord, and a very great multitude of them should perish'.<sup>1</sup>

It is a far cry from the clouds and lightning of Sinai to Nazareth's routine sabbath service (Can anything that is good come from Nazareth? <sup>2</sup>) There spoke the Lord whom it was death to see, here a carpenter with whom his hearers had rubbed familiar shoulders for thirty years.

While Nazareth refused to accept Jesus even as the messenger of the God of Israel, the Christian believes him to be that God speaking in Person. Where Nazareth 'had no confidence in him', a Christian must give the Galilean carpenter his mind and heart unreservedly because he is God Incarnate.

The christian life should be a work of art patiently, meticulously executed, with our thoughts, words and choices as the materials, and a passionate adherence (the word 'acceptance' has too passive a sound) to the doctrine of the Incarnation as our inspiration. It is therefore of the greatest importance to us to have a clear and undistorted appreciation of this doctrine. We must grasp the reality of Christ's human nature, if possible as clearly as the sceptical Nazarenes. We must simultaneously hold in the eye of our understanding the fact of his divinity. But we must penetrate the mystery further. It is not enough to see the humanity and divinity of Christ side by side. As the two slides fuse in a stereoscope into a single three dimensional image, the two aspects of Christ must be correctly focused by us into a single vision in depth. Our knowledge of his Godhead must irradiate the man. And our knowledge of the man must show us God, God revealing himself through human words and deeds, through a man's attitudes and choices, through his life and death and resurrection. For us the Lord on Sinai's summit and the carpenter in the synagogue chair are not only compatible, they are reciprocal; they are parts of a single, if complex, revelation; they are One.

When we first put the two slides into our theological stereoscope the task of focusing them into a single picture may seem hopeless. On the one side we have the terrifying God of Sinai with a whole people trembling at the mountain's foot: the Lord of the burning

<sup>1</sup> Exod 19, 16-21.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 1, 46.

bush to whom the barefooted Moses listens with his face covered, the vision of fire within the whirlwind before which Ezechiel fell face downwards. How are we to superimpose on these awesome manifestations our tenderly cherished pictures of the Christchild on Mary's lap, the Master insisting on meeting the children, the broken body on Calvary heraldically supported by the broken-legged corpses of two thieves?

The first step in adjusting our focus is to realise that both on Sinai and in the stable, whether enthroned above the seraphim or speaking from the cross between two thieves, God has come to man. He is putting himself in touch with man, and is doing so to bring man nearer to himself. God throws a bridgehead into the world of man, onto Horeb or onto Nazareth, so that man can set foot on that bridge and come nearer to God. With the Incarnation the bridge leaps right into the human world. This last span of the bridge is the master stroke of the divine strategy. It was unexpected then; it is astounding to us now; but seen in perspective it is the last, if greatest, arch of a bridge which had been building ever since Adam had undermined its predecessor.

God's manifestation of himself in the Old Testament emphasises his greatness, his glory, his power and especially his transcendence. Yahweh is no local god, is not to be identified with any place or natural force. He is outside the world, beyond creation, beyond human comprehension. To the Israelites surrounded and even at times permeated by pagan cults it is this aspect of God which must be hammered home. They must not try to express him in any kind of image. To touch his ark, even with the best intentions, may bring instant death. Whatever belongs to the Lord they must set clean apart from ordinary use, as they must set aside the Lord's day and keep it unsullied by ordinary human occupations.

God exists in ineffable majesty inaccessibly remote for the human condition. When the first bridgeheads of revelation are built, the Israelites are given blinding glimpses of the far side of the chasm which must lie between the Creator and creation. Yet even in the Old Testament God had leaned across the abyss to Israel. It was his will to make of Israel his people; they were to know him and learn to worship him.

But in Christ God becomes a native of our side of the chasm. God now builds from both sides at once. But he builds from our side as man. A ship's gangway rests lightly on the quay; but the pier of a great bridge must be set on solid foundations. God's

bridge between earth and heaven roots itself (the mixed metaphor is permissible, for this is a living bridge) deep in human soil. The Messias did not leap down from heaven. His human life began where all human life begins:

It dates from day  
Of his going in Galilee;  
Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey;  
Manger, maiden's knee.<sup>1</sup>

He did not descend from on high to snatch us up; he grew up amongst us to lead us to heaven. He had been born in Bethlehem when it was crammed with people for the census. He grew up within sight of a great arterial road sweeping from Egypt up to Damascus and beyond, busy with the traffic of a vast Empire. He died in Jerusalem swollen with pilgrims for the Pasch. He was not only present among these people. He was one of them. He was one of the children at Bethlehem, one of the inhabitants of Nazareth, one of the Jews who had come up to celebrate the Pasch. He was one of a batch of three condemned felons. This was a human being who needed swaddling clothes in the beginning and a winding sheet in the end; who worked, woke, ate and slept again, who prayed, kept the Sabbath and went to Jerusalem for the great feasts. He knew fear, felt anger and loved intensely. We have already heard the people of Nazareth testify that he was just one of the village, 'the carpenter'.

They were quite right in saying that he was one of themselves, altogether wrong in thinking that he was just one of them. It was true that, like all men, he was 'born of woman'. But there was no human father; while his mother was unique, for she was without original sin. Christ was a man, born of a woman, but he was conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Here is a human birth; but here, too, is a divine intervention in nature, the special presence of God and the total absence of sin.

Nor were the external circumstances of Christ's birth ordinary. There were no lightnings or voices from the cloud; but the angels directed the shepherds and the star guided the Magi. The shepherds were given a sign: they would find the child in a manger. He lay in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Here is a

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, 7.

dramatic reversal of Sinai. The Israelites were forbidden to trespass on the mountain where God delivered his message to them; but in Bethlehem it is the bearer of revelation who is kept at a distance.

In the New Testament God comes among men as a man, but with signs to show that he is from heaven. And his advent divides mankind. He has come to bridge the gap between God and man, and a new fissure opens, this time between man and man. There are those who accept God made man, and those who reject him. Some will rise with Christ to God and some will refuse. In the next scene of the gospel Simeon puts this into words: 'this child is destined to bring about the fall of many and the rise of many in Israel; to be a sign which man will refuse to acknowledge'.<sup>1</sup>

For us Christians the word 'world' has two senses. It can mean creation, the work of God's hands, which he himself judges to be very good! To this first approval of the world, God has added the sanctification of the world by means of the Incarnation. In Christ God trod the earth, breathed its atmosphere and ate its fruits. Christ, being Man, was part of the material universe. To a Christian all the earth is holy ground by reason of Christ's sojourn in it. Human nature, which was originally fashioned in God's likeness, is to be specially revered, because God through Christ has possessed it.

The second sense of 'world' is derived from St. John's gospel e.g. 'If the world hates you, be sure that it hated me, before it learned to hate you'.<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament God no longer impresses his transcendent holiness on man by keeping man at a distance. He comes among men and offers himself to them. But his holiness is there and its presence is acknowledged by the way evil shrinks from it. Evil spirits fear him and evil men want nothing to do with him. Where men's minds are dominated by pride, by greed for power or wealth, by the lusts of the flesh, or merely preoccupied with frivolities, Christ is not wanted. At best they are indifferent to him; sometimes they are contemptuous; at worst they hate him. This is the second sense of the word 'world', the world of man where man is indifferent to, contemptuous of or hostile to Christ, to the holiness of God in men's midst.

That there was no human habitation in Bethlehem in which Christ might be born, symbolises the indifference of the 'world'. The behaviour of Herod symbolises its hatred. Because the child

<sup>1</sup> Lk 2, 34.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 15, 18. Cf. *infra*, p. 72.

is a possible menace to his own power and place, the child must die. The ruthlessness of Herod makes refugees of the Holy Family, turns them into 'displaced persons'. Even after Herod's death, the possibility of his son behaving in the same way bars the Holy Family from returning to their ancestral town. For this reason Christ grew up not in the city of his ancestor, David, but in relatively distant Galilee. Moses dared not look at the burning bush. Now that the Light of the World is come, men try to banish it, even to extinguish it.

The Light of the World did not shine upon it from the distant heavens. It burned in the very midst of men. The public career of the Messiah opens not with his showing himself to the crowds as a leader, but with his taking his place as one of the crowd. John, besieged by the admiring multitude, had urged them to keep their enthusiasm and devotion till the Christ himself should come to receive it. He was understandingly taken aback to find the Messiah among those who pressed to be baptised. His baptism was only a preliminary ritual to prepare the Jews to receive the Messiah. He had never expected the Messiah himself to undergo it with every one else, like any devout, contrite Jew hoping to see and to belong to the Kingdom. In coming for baptism, Christ appears to abdicate his own leadership, because he has become one of the crowd, and the prerogative of his own sinlessness, for baptism is a purifying rite.

Then the descent of the Holy Ghost signalises his mission and his power, and the voice of the Father testifies to his surpassing holiness. 'Suddenly heaven was opened . . .'<sup>1</sup> The firmament, which in ancient Jewish cosmogony separated the earth from God on high, ceases to do so. This is a dramatic scene with the heavens parting while the 'dove descending breaks the air'. But it is centred on an ungarbed human figure. His nakedness as he stands in the water symbolises not only his humanity, but the completeness with which he identifies himself with humanity. When Christ hid himself among the crowd 'Heaven was opened' and God ceased to hide himself from man.

In total contrast the next scene shows us Christ plunged in solitude. The Spirit leads him from the crowds round John to the uninhabited wilderness. But if alone, he is still a man and faces the tempter alone, as all men do. The Holy One of God experiences the intimate encounter of the Evil One. His mind and will expe-

---

<sup>1</sup> Mt 3, 16.

rienced seduction by Satan, a seduction which was not unreal because it was totally ineffective. A mind and will given to God, a mind and will possessed by God, were impervious to seduction, but not unexposed to it. The citadel was impregnable, but the enemy could still attack it. In these two scenes we have met Christ among the crowds round John, a man among men, and Christ separated and alone, still a man undergoing a human experience. And the separateness of the wilderness symbolises the 'apartness' of the man without sin.

This double aspect of Christ among the crowds and Christ apart persists throughout his public life. He steepes himself in crowds. He harangues the people in the North and in the South, in the capital and in the countryside. He goes from city to village, from Galilee to Judaea, that he may make contact with all. He is to be found in the Temple and in the wilderness, in the mountains and on the lake, and perhaps most of all on the road. He will address the crowds or talk to Nicodemus in private. He goes to the poor and accepts the invitations of the rich. He will expound to the learned and explain to the ignorant. He directs his appeal both to the idealist and to the self-indulgent.

But he remains a man apart. He withdraws to pray. He has left home and kin. And in spite of the crowds and the company of the disciples he is alone. He is alone as a widow with her small children or a teacher with his young pupils is alone, because so many of their thoughts, so much of their feeling, almost all of their responsibility cannot be shared. His wisdom isolates him. Even his closest disciples are only toddlers along his road. Also his power inspires awe, and awe isolates 'who is this, who gives command to wind and water and is obeyed?'<sup>1</sup> Certainly not a man of their own breed. Peter finds it unbearable: 'Leave me to myself, Lord, . . . I am a sinner'.<sup>2</sup>

Peter's request is not granted. Instead he is chosen to share Christ's pastoral work and ultimately to assume the principal responsibility for it. It is the discovery that he is unwell which sends a man to the doctor; it is the realisation of his own ignorance which turns a man into a student. When men begin to feel the gap between themselves and Christ, the gap has already begun to narrow; they are drawn towards him.

When a teacher gladly receives pupils, it is not because he enjoys

<sup>1</sup> Lk 8, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 5, 8.

their ignorance. He rejoices in the prospect of replacing ignorance by knowledge and understanding. Christ's love of mankind held no complaisance for their condition. It is treacherously easy to be sentimental about Christ and sinners. He was never complaisant or accommodating about sin. John had already demanded repentance from Israel, if it was to be fit to receive Christ, and had predicted that Christ would be still more exacting . . . 'whose fan is in his hand and he will thoroughly cleanse his floor'.<sup>1</sup> Christ insisted not only that the commandments be externally observed, but that a man's mind and heart should be cleansed of hateful or lecherous thoughts. Nothing must be tolerated which inclines us to sin. 'If thy right eye is the occasion of thy falling into sin, pluck it out, . . . if thy right hand . . . cut it off'.<sup>2</sup> Concern with material possessions is dangerous. 'Where your treasure house is, there your heart is too'.<sup>3</sup> Even the most natural and sound affections must be disciplined; 'He that loveth father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me'.<sup>4</sup> Christ is compassionate, not indulgent.

Yet the very austerity of Christ's demands are part of his passionate solicitude for human beings. The concern he shows by the abundance of his physical cures strikes to a deeper level. He longs to cure them of ignorance and sin, to give them a transforming vision of God and themselves, to lift them to heights of detachment, of mercy, of selfless devotion to God and man.

The serene atmosphere of those heights we can sense at the Last Supper. His steady purpose of serving his Father and of redeeming his fellow men is about to lead to his death. But the harshness of the prospect is swallowed in the warmth and vastness of the love which prompts it. Judas's betrayal and Peter's desertion, though foreseen, do not mar the affectionate confidence with which he discourses. His detachment is complete; his mercy such that neither Judas nor Peter receives a harsh word; his selfless devotion needs no comment; his sinlessness is plainly stated; 'the prince of this world cometh and in me he hath not anything'.<sup>5</sup>

The Apostles gathered about him are the first fruits of his life and imminent death. They have not yet reached maturity. That will come after the Ascension with the descent of the Holy Ghost. Then their devotion to his Father through him, their devotion to mankind for him, will be complete. Then they will achieve that degree of detachment which will enable them to take exile, perse-

<sup>1</sup> Mt 3, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 5, 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 6, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Mt 10, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 14, 30.



cution and unending labour in their stride. Men in the world, they will travel the world to bring men the revelation of God through Christ. They will be in the world, but their lives will be centred on the risen, triumphant Christ in Heaven.

Christ's work on earth was symbolised on that night by the institution of the Eucharist. Bread and wine, the staple commodities which nourished the life of his people, become his body and blood, the body and blood that his love will immolate for mankind. Consumed by his followers, it will unite them through his humanity with the Divinity. Similarly the ordinary things of life are sanctified by Christ's life and sacrifice so that they become for the Christian a means of contact with Christ and God.

The serenity of the supper room dissolves into the agony of Gethsemane. Here is the humanity of Christ at its plainest. God made man tastes the bitterness of fear. He drinks deeply of it; and at the prospect of death, of exposure to hatred and brutality, all his human instincts cause him to flinch and to recoil. Once again, as in the wilderness, he is alone, though unwillingly alone. To Christ as to every man fear is a private enemy. Yet his selfless dedication to his Father holds firm. He will die painfully for his fellowmen. He will do so primarily for love of his Father.

Having passed through the pit of fear Christ pursues our salvation through the depths of human iniquity. He became the victim of the ruthless hostility of the priests, of the motiveless brutality of the soldiers, of the unprincipled selfishness of Pilate.

Never is the holiness of Christ more evident than when evil has its way with him. It is because he is the enemy of evil that evil does its worst to him: suborns his friends, scatters and dismays his companions, blackens his name, crucifies his body and pursues him with mockery to the end. The effect of this fully vented hatred is to reveal more clearly his goodness, his love, his mercy; the goodness which prompted evil's hostility, the immense mercy which he expresses in the midst of his suffering, the vast love which has led him to this end.

God, so distant from man in his infinite greatness, power and goodness, entered into human life. He had been a child and a corpse. He had both lived obscurely and been a focus of public interest. Yet in the midst of the world, he was always at odds with the 'world'. The 'world' drove him into exile as a child, rejected him as its leader and finally crucified him. The 'world' is ruthless, sometimes frivolous, always selfish. Christ was merciful, unsparing

of himself, wholly engaged in serving his Father and for his Father's sake, his fellows. The world turned in on itself, preoccupied with itself, degenerates into the 'world'. Christ's mind and heart was always engaged with the 'things that are my Father's'.<sup>1</sup> He was deeply involved with the world of which he had been a part, to win it for his Father. But the real focus of his mind was his Father. Hence that 'separateness' of Christ which balances his involvement in the world. It was a separateness which was meant to disappear, because he wished to fix other men's minds and hearts on his Father, to raise them to his own unworldly standards of judgement and conduct.

After the resurrection, he ascended into heaven. God had passed through the womb, cradle, the carpenter's shop, the crowds, Calvary and the grave to his own place. He came there still a man. A man is King of Heaven. His final passage left the disciples staring after him. They had to turn back their faces to Jerusalem and their minds to the world, but their view of the world would be centred on Christ in heaven. They would involve themselves unsparingly in the world, and they would be 'separate' from the world. They too would suffer at the hands of the 'world' and come to their own Calvary, to their own resurrection and ultimately to their own ascension. The bridge between the world and God had been built. It was already in use.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lk 2, 49.