

WE GIVE THEE THANKS

By ALOYSIUS CHURCH

At the end of the Offertory of the Mass, the people are invited to offer thanks: *gratias agamus Domino Deo nostro*. In the offering of bread and wine, we have already affirmed our readiness to offer thanks at this time and in this place. Yet our offering cannot be confined solely to what is done within the four walls of the building. The bread and wine are themselves symbols of our daily labour. If we wish to enter fully into the solemn liturgical act of thanksgiving, then we must bring to the altar hearts that thank God not only in church, but at all times and in all places.

St. Paul tells his christians: 'Let your contentment be in the Holy Spirit; your tongues unloosed in psalms and spiritual music, as you sing and give praise to the Lord in your hearts. Give thanks continually to God, who is our Father, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'.¹ Thanksgiving is to be an habitual attitude of the christian. With the coming of Christ, a totally new power of offering thanks to God is given to men. 'It is through him, then, that we must offer to God a continual sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips that give thanks to his name'.² Our Lord himself sets the example in his own prayer. When his disciples return from their first mission, he prays: 'Father, who art Lord of heaven and earth, I give thee praise that thou hast hidden all this from the wise and prudent and revealed it to little children'.³ When Lazarus was raised from the dead, 'Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven and said: Father I thank Thee for hearing my prayer'.⁴ The solemn sacerdotal prayer at the last supper opens with the words: 'Father . . . give glory to thy Son, that the Son may give glory to thee'.⁵ And only a day or two previously he had said: 'Father, glorify thy name'.⁶ Apart from the few phrases that occur in the story of his passion, these are the only recorded prayers of our Lord. It is not surprising, then, that he should teach his disciples to begin their prayer: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name'.

It is easy to have a superficial notion of what it means to thank God. Religious thanksgiving passes far beyond modern conventions

¹ Eph 5, 19-20.

² Heb 13, 15.

³ Mt 11, 25.

⁴ Jn 11, 41.

⁵ Jn 17, 1.

⁶ Jn 12, 28.

of politeness or etiquette. It is a function of our faith, not a spiritual touching of the cap. The cap is detachable, but the attitude of thanksgiving makes or mars our relationship to God. Without it we cannot grasp the reality of our existence – our dependence on the free gift of God. The freedom and the generosity and the untainted goodness of God's giving is unique, and when a man's faith reveals to him what he owes God, he is filled with reverence, astonished, and moved to utter praise. He is deeply aware that he is in the presence of his Creator and Father; and this fundamental recognition, itself a gift, is thanksgiving. Holy Scripture struggles to give expression to this many-sided attitude of the creature before his Creator. The phrases 'give thanks', 'give glory', 'praise', 'bless', 'honour' and even 'confess' God, are synonymous. The pagans of whom Paul speaks to his Romans are condemned because they lack this salutary attitude: 'There is no excuse for them; although they had knowledge of God, they did not honour him or give thanks to him as God . . . they who claimed to be so wise, turned fools and exchanged the glory of the imperishable God for representations of perishable man, of bird, beast, and reptile'.¹

If the pagan, when confronted with the works of God's material creation, is considered to have motive enough and to spare for constant thanksgiving, what of the christian? To him is revealed 'the unfathomable riches of Christ'.² Born into messianic times, he can see what God has done to build the new creation. He can acknowledge his own personal share in the mystery that is revealed in Christ. This vision gives a new dimension, an unsuspected depth to his motives for thanksgiving. He now sees that the power and efficacy of his every act of thanksgiving is drawn from the eucharistic thanksgiving of Christ, who gives himself to the christian continually in the representation of his passion, death and resurrection. The pauline epistles faithfully reflect the ideal christian attitude: the wondering, admiring spirit of gratitude at the unfolding in human history of God's mysterious plan, by which all men are enabled to give glory to him through Christ. The opening words of Ephesians, 'Blessed be that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing, higher than heaven itself',³ are a typical example.

It is, however, possible to be a christian and yet fail to appreciate the continued intervention of God in human affairs. To recognise

¹ Rom 1, 21.

² Eph 3, 9.

³ Eph 1, 3-14.

the Lord at work in his Church, and to greet him generously, demands mature faith. We are to learn from the example of those who were first privileged to meet him on earth. To them, the manifestation of his presence was an object of wonder and joy, issuing in praise and thanksgiving. When Zachary's dumbness was removed, 'he broke into speech, giving praise to God; so that fear came on all their neighbourhood';¹ and he celebrated the birth of Christ's forerunner with the *Benedictus*, the canticle of praise which is still the morning prayer of the Church: 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel: he has visited his people and wrought their redemption'.² This same term 'visitation' is used in the book of Exodus to describe God's deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt: 'And God said again to Moses . . . Go gather together the ancients of Israel, and thou shalt say to them: the Lord God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, hath appeared to me saying: visiting I have visited you, and I have seen all that hath befallen you in Egypt. And I have said the word to bring you forth out of the affliction of Egypt. . .'³ Zachary sees in the birth of John the Baptist the beginnings of the further visitation of God, the unique visitation. Amongst those who recognise this visitation in the New Testament, the effect is always the same: they experience a sense of awe and reverence before the special presence of God, they are filled with wonder and amazement and joy, and their response is to praise and thank God. So the angels herald the coming events on Christmas eve with a hymn of praise, 'Glory to God in the highest'; and the shepherds go home from Bethlehem 'giving praise and glory to God at seeing and hearing that all was as it had been told them'.⁴ Already at Mary's greeting the child in the womb of Elizabeth had leapt for joy; and Elizabeth in her wonder and astonishment had asked 'how have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord?'⁵

The christian who gives thanks continually is the one who continues to recognise his Lord's visitation. He retains something of the sense of wonder that the witnesses of the New Testament possessed in full measure. For what the apostles and disciples saw wrought before their very eyes we are now enabled to see by faith, assisted by symbol and sign. The manner of seeing is different, but the reality is the same. It was Peter's privilege to step from his fishing boat to greet the Son of God by the lakeside; it is our privilege to encounter his saving presence in our ordinary lives in the Church. On earth

¹ Lk 1, 64.² Lk 1, 68.³ Exod 3, 16.⁴ Lk 2, 20.⁵ Lk 2, 43.

he used to cure a blindness or heal a leprosy with the words 'thy faith hath made thee whole'; he would feed the hungry by miraculously multiplying the loaves. He now does the same at a deeper level, in Baptism and the holy Eucharist. There is no startling effect on the surface but the interior change is no less real. Here is again the special visitation of God at which we can marvel and wonder and give thanks. The effect of the miraculous catch of fish on Peter was that he fell to his knees, suddenly aware that he was in the presence of the majestic power of God: 'depart from me, for I am a sinful man'.¹ Yet the continued and daily action of God is no less immediate, present and identifiable in our own lives. His action, and its quality, is made known in the sacramental sign. Through these sacred rites the Word speaks, informs, utters perennially the words that are words of life; and amongst the bystanders those that have ears to hear, listen to his word, keep it and give thanks.

Yet it is only because we have received Christ's Spirit that we are able to recognise him in his visitations. Without his help we would remain blind and uncomprehending, like the condemned pagans or the resisting pharisees. 'What we have received is no spirit of worldly wisdom: it is the spirit that has come from God, to make us understand God's gifts to us; gifts which we make known not in such words as human wisdom teaches, but in words taught us by the spirit, matching what is spiritual with what is spiritual'.²

'The children of God are led by the Spirit of God'.³ Our experience, in faith, of the prompting of the Holy Spirit in all our work should move us continually to awe and wonder. Our awareness of God's action should make us say continually 'who am I?'. Our move forward to meet our Lord must begin always with this step backwards, otherwise there will be no meeting. But with the deepening of reverence we shall become more sensitive to the spiritual reality of God's direction of our lives, and we shall make more grateful response to God's daily prompting. So our thanksgiving is to grow until our every act gives glory to God.

There is a gradual growth in the spirit of thanksgiving. There is first the stage of thanking God for his gifts in the sense that we see his gifts as gifts. It is possible to do this rather in the way in which we thank people whom we do not know very well. But even on this unofficial level the parallel is not perfect, because when we acknowledge the gifts of God we are already in the realm of faith, and faith

¹ Lk 5, 8.

² 1 Cor 2, 12.

³ Rom 8, 14.

of its nature tends to fructify and deepen its hold. Here we acknowledge the gifts of God, of creation, of salvation, of his particular providence that has guided our life and continues to do so in the Church through the sacraments and through the special characteristics of our station or vocation in life and its work. There follows a second stage, where we no longer see these gifts in themselves, in isolation as it were, but as acts of the giver. It is the giver who holds our attention, not the gifts. It was in this way that the miracles of the Gospels were seen as signs of God's special visitation. They were wonders, not so much because they had the qualities of a stunt or magic trick, but because in them the divine goodness and wisdom were seen in action. Only the believer could see this; miracles were not performed indiscriminately for all. Our Lord was silent before Herod; but when he raised to life the son of the widow of Naim 'there came a great fear on them all. And they glorified God saying: a great prophet is risen up amongst us; and God has visited his people'. God continues to 'visit' his Church daily. The Word is made flesh, the Holy Spirit is sent into our hearts. What he has to give, he continues to give, and it is a further gift of his that enables us to recognise him in his giving.

There is yet a further stage. When we recognise the action of God, we must have the courage to recognise it as directed towards ourselves. When Zachaeus climbed the tree to see his Lord, he did not at first suspect the gift that was to be given him. Yet the Lord was to come that day right into his house. When the bystanders saw the wonderful works of God in the Gospel miracles, they were not necessarily miracles worked on themselves. They could, in a sense, remain spectators watching from the side-lines. To grasp the reality of God's action in the world as completely transforming our own personal destiny: that is a further insight. So St. Peter was given the gift to say 'depart from me for I am a sinful man'. He saw the catch of fish as an action aimed at himself. So too the Centurion could recognise the healing of his servant as an invitation to the personal surrender of faith. The shining example of this third stage in the perfection of christian thanksgiving is the attitude of our Lady, as she sang her canticle of praise, the '*Magnificat*'. She was struck with wonder and amazement that all the promises to Israel should be fulfilled in her person. It was not only that the day of God's visitation of his people was at hand, but that she herself was to be the focus and centre of the whole action. She could look back and see all the great souls that had waited for this day, their eyes all fixed on her. She

could also look forward and see how the events of her life were to be the turning-point for all the race that was to follow. She would mother not only the Son of God, but all others who were to be called the children of God. Seeing all this accomplished in and through herself, she could, in true humility, give God the glory and sing her song of praise.

Our thanksgiving to God should have the same personal emphasis. We are not members of a crowd that lose their individuality in the rush. In the same individual way we are privileged to take part in the work of redemption, to share intimately in the purposes and activity of God's visitation of his people, by our lives as baptised christians in the Church. All nations and generations can look upon us also and call us blessed. The ordinary actions of our lives have become the scattered fragments which are gathered together in the eucharistic thanksgiving of God's Son. In these he raises his eyes towards heaven and gives thanks. In these his blood is shed again and again for the redemption of many.

So the movement of thanksgiving reaches its full term. When by faith we realise and recognise the continued 'visitation' of God as it affects us personally, our response is to give ourselves over wholly to his influence and direction. God acts in human history now; our grateful response is to act with him, to give ourselves to the work he is doing, to 'meet' him in such a way that we co-operate fully with his prompting and busy ourselves, with all our powers, in the work which he has given us to do: his will for us. This will of God is the sanctification of men, and all christians are called upon to assist in some way with this work. The 'will of God' will be found by each one in his own particular vocation; but it will mean that all his powers and faculties are co-ordinated, integrated, and concentrated on the re-creating work of God on earth. We do not merely honour him then with our lips, but in deed, with everything we have. 'Not every one that sayeth to me Lord, Lord, shall enter into heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father'. The shepherds adored at the manger and made their way back to their flocks giving praise and glory to God, both they were indeed returning to the job they had left. We shall remain poor christians if we cannot find the way of meeting God in the daily duties of life. It is here that we have to learn to recognise his visitation.