

THE WORKING OF YOUR POWER

By CLIFFORD HOWELL

INCREASE the working of your power in us, Lord, that the nourishment of the divine mysteries may fit us to receive their promised gifts'.¹ Thus does the Church remind us that the spiritual riches placed at our disposal by the celebration of her liturgy are not the fruit of our own activity, but are effects of the working of God's power. This postcommunion from the second Sunday after the Epiphany is but one example of many references in the proper of this season to our utter dependence on the mighty power of our Father in heaven as manifested to us in Christ his Son.

The collects of both the second and third Sundays after the Epiphany make a direct appeal to God's power. The opening words of both are *Omnipotens sempiterne Deus*, and the attitude they express persists through the whole season until Septuagesima. For, by appealing to God under his title of 'omnipotent', the Church is not only voicing her faith that with God all things are possible, but, by the very choice of this attribute for special mention, she is humbly admitting that it is the one that is supremely important to herself because of her weakness. Yes, – the Church is weak in spite of her divine origin, for she is made up of human material which so often fails. It is only through the almighty power of God that she can fulfil the task allotted to her; in that power, become incarnate in Christ her Saviour, she has assurance of ultimate victory.

This power of Christ is proclaimed in ringing tones in the Mass of the Epiphany itself: 'see, he comes, the Lord and Conqueror; possessed of empire, power and majesty' (*Introit*). Though only the manifestation to the wise men from the east is commemorated in the Mass itself, we know that the feast as a whole is concerned also with two other mysteries – Christ's baptism in the Jordan and his first miracle at Cana; all three of them, in different ways, show forth the divine power dwelling in him.

¹ All quotations from the propers of the Mass are here taken from *The Layman's Missal*. (Burns and Oates, 1962).

As he lay in the manger and received the gifts of the Magi his power was hidden. Nevertheless it was there, for the Magi acknowledged it in their act of adoration. At the baptism in the Jordan Christ was shown forth as the Son of God by the awe-inspiring portents of the voice from heaven and the descent of the Spirit; and 'in Cana of Galilee Jesus began his miracles and made known the glory that was his, so that his disciples learned to believe in him'.¹ Here his power was no longer latent but had come into action.

Can we discern human weakness in these three episodes, as a contrast with the divine power which they manifest? Surely that is not difficult. The story of the Magi displays a double weakness on the part of Herod and of 'the chief priests and learned men'. There was the moral weakness of their sin in refusing belief to the inspired word of God which told them that the Messiah had actually been born. And there was physical weakness in Herod's failure to carry out his fell design of killing the infant Saviour of the world. He could not prevail against the working of God's power. The story of Christ's baptism is concerned with human weakness as being the very cause of it; for it was at this moment that Christ formally dedicated himself to his task of taking away the sin of the world. At Cana human weakness appears in a form devoid of moral evil – the mere inability of the bridegroom to provide enough wine for his many guests. Thus the double theme – Christ's power and man's weakness – can be discerned in all three episodes which form the subject of the Epiphany feast.

It is after the feast itself that the Church devotes more explicit attention to it. She begins on the second Sunday with an echo of the Epiphany in the gospel reading, which, as we have already said, shows forth Christ's power. But it is in the processional chants that the power-theme is most clearly proclaimed. Most of these chants are triumphant acclamations taken from the psalms, praising the great deeds of the King of heaven. 'The Lord sent forth his word and healed them. He rescued them from death. Bid them praise the Lord for his mercy; for the wonderful things he has done for mankind' (Gradual). 'You worshippers of God, come, listen to me, and I will tell you how wonderful are the things that the Lord has done for me' (Offertory).

The chants for the third until the sixth Sundays after Epiphany

¹ Jn 2, 11.

are one unchanging formulary acting as a kind of framework to indicate the general theme; it is in the other parts of the proper that particular applications of it are suggested. Of this framework of chants the *introit* invites all to adore 'the Lord who is King; let all the islands of the world rejoice'; the gradual directs attention to the final coming of Christ in power and glory when 'he will reveal himself in all his majesty'; the offertory praises the power of Christ which has wrought such marvels: 'The Lord's right hand has proved its might; the Lord's right hand has raised me up'. And the communion antiphon relates the effect upon true believers: 'All were filled with wonder as they listened to the words that God spoke to them'.

Against this background of the power-theme we find the weakness-theme brought into the foreground in different ways, each with its own lesson for us. On the third Sunday, for instance, the collect makes direct allusion to it and points out the contrast. 'Almighty and everliving God, look kindly on our weakness, and protect us with your strong right hand'. The gospel tells us of two men who were afflicted by physical weakness – the leper and the centurion's servant. One was sick and one was dying; and the power of Christ was applied to the weakness of both. The Church proclaims the story of their cure, not only that we may be 'filled with wonder', but also that we may learn something for our own good. The thought of the physical weakness of these two men should remind us of our moral weakness – our sinfulness. We also stand in need of 'the working of God's power', and should be comforted by the knowledge that in the Church it is ever at our disposal. Just as Christ healed the bodies of those men, so also he stands ready to heal our souls. When we are afflicted by the leprosy of sin we can go to him and say 'Lord, if it be thy will, thou hast power to make me clean'.¹ We can approach Christ in the person of his priest in the confessional: and the priest, stretching out his hand towards us as Christ did to the leper, will say 'by his authority I absolve you from all your sins'. The leprosy of our soul will be cleansed away.

But there are certain conditions for this – conditions exemplified by the centurion of the gospel story. They are a genuine desire for cure, faith and humility. It cannot have been easy for an officer in the army of an occupying power to seek a favour from a member of the subjugated people; to do this in public would but enhance the

¹ Mt 8, 2.

difficulty. But the centurion's desire for the cure of his servant was so strong that nothing would deter him. At times we, too, may find it difficult to summon up sufficient determination to approach the priest, but if we truly desire the cure of our soul we will go to him nevertheless. The centurion had great faith – so great that our Lord praised it in the hearing of all. 'Believe me, I have not found faith like this even in Israel'.¹ The leper had faith too: 'Lord, thou hast power to make me clean'. And obviously he was humble for he 'came and knelt before him'. Even more clear was the humility of the centurion whose words have been immortalized by inclusion in the Mass at the moment before holy communion: 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof'. Desire for cure, faith, humility – here we see three of the dispositions we must have whenever we make use of the sacrament of penance in which 'the working of Christ's power' is applied to our weakness.

In the epistle of this same Mass St. Paul warns us against a number of forms which our weakness may take. We are not to give ourselves airs of wisdom, nor to repay injury with injury; we are not to be quarrelsome or spiteful: 'Rather feed thy enemy if he is hungry, give him drink if he is thirsty'.² In such readiness to help others we shall resemble our Master who showed himself ready, even eager, to assist the leper and the centurion as soon as they had laid their needs before him.

The Mass of the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany follows the lead of the third in using the collect to draw our attention to the power-weakness contrast by means of explicit reference. 'O God, you see that our human weakness cannot stand firm amidst great dangers; keep us whole in mind and body, that with your help we may have victory over the sorry effects of sin'. We humbly confess that of ourselves we are powerless, and are utterly dependent on 'the working of his power'. This is the lesson taught in a vivid and forceful way to the apostles (and thereby to us) by the event narrated in the gospel. The twelve were in their boat with their beloved Master who was so tired after his heavy day of preaching that he lay asleep. Not even when the weather became rough did the tossing of the boat awake him. Storms were frequent on the sea of Galilee, and the apostles, experienced fishermen, must have encountered many of them in their day. It seems probable that at first they were not alarmed, and felt confident that they could cope with the situ-

¹ Mt 8, 10.

² Rom 12, 20.

ation by their own skill as seamen, as they had done many times before. But this was no ordinary storm; it developed such an unprecedented violence that they became afraid. In a panic they awoke Jesus and cried out to him: 'Lord, save us, we are sinking'. As a result they witnessed an amazing instance of 'the working of his power', for 'he rose up and checked the winds and the sea, and there was a deep calm'.¹

The bark of Peter has ever been considered as a symbol or type of the Church. Throughout the course of history the Church has been in many storms; waves of persecution have buffeted her, winds of heresy have howled about her, schisms have rent her very sails, yet she has never sunk. The whole might of the Roman empire once hurled itself against the infant Church; as judged by human probabilities the survival of christianity seemed impossible. Yet the day came when Roman emperors were kneeling before popes to receive their crowns. The Arian heresy once advanced in triumph, overran a large proportion of the Catholic world and even pushed a pope from his throne. But who fears Arianism now? Very serious damage was done to the Church by the schism which tore from her so many christians of the eastern rites, yet she still holds her course. In those terrible days when the armies of Islam menaced the very heart of christian Europe it must have seemed to many that the Church was doomed, but she survives. What a great storm arose when the petty princes of Germany, the war lords of England, the covenanters of Scotland and many others united in their efforts to shatter the bulwarks of Peter's boat and overwhelm her in the floods of heresy. She was battered, indeed, but did not sink. And today, when the menace of communism, pledged to a godless philosophy and armed with gigantic power, has ruined many of the Church's most promising missions, the situation again looks grave. But Christ is still in Peter's boat, for he has promised to remain with his Church 'even until the consummation of the world'.² In his own good time he will arise and say 'Peace, be still'.³ and there will be a great calm. Divine power will come to the rescue of human weakness.

We may see in the ship tossed by the waves not only a symbol of the Church, but also of each individual christian soul. For the christian life is like a voyage, and many storms have to be encountered before the port of heaven is reached. We follow a Master whose glory was won only at the cost of his passion and death; all of us who hope

¹ Mt 8, 25-27.

² Mt 28, 20.

³ Lk 4, 39.

to share his victory are called to share also in his cross. The world may reward its favourites with success, wealth, pleasure (though none of these guarantee even earthly happiness); such things are not promised to the christian. It is usually the wicked who flourish here below, while good people have to bear suffering. This very fact is often brought up as a reproach against God's servants.

And yet we should not be astonished when storms arise in our personal lives. We have to be tried, like gold in the furnace, and the dross must be purged away. 'If the world hates you', said our Lord, 'be sure that it hated me before it learned to hate you. If you belonged to the world, the world would know you for its own and would love you; it is because you do not belong to the world, because I singled you out from the midst of the world, that the world hates you. Do not forget what I said to you. No servant can be greater than his master. They will persecute you just as they have persecuted me . . . they will treat you thus because you bear my name'.¹

Such things as unfair treatment, failure or frustration may, like storms, disturb the serenity of our voyage through life; they can arise without fault of our own just because we do our best to hold the course which Christ has charted for us. Never should they prompt us to ask 'What have I done that God should afflict me so?' Our Lord loved his apostles; yet their lot was scourging, imprisonment and martyrdom. Above all he loved his mother; yet her sufferings at the foot of the cross were such as to earn for her the title of 'Queen of Martyrs'. Mysterious though it be, we must believe that undeserved trials can be the mark of God's favour.

But can we presume to claim that our afflictions are undeserved? We are poor weak sinners, and often the storms which buffet us originate in faults of our own. Perhaps we have not 'fulfilled the demands of the law' set forth in the epistle of this Mass we are now considering. Breach of the commandments there mentioned by St. Paul may be the reason why we are tossed by storms of temptation, chilled by winds of doubt or threatened by waves of passion. Especially when 'amidst great dangers' we must beware of being 'men of little faith'; Christ is with us, and if we turn to him for aid he will calm these storms and 'keep us whole in body and mind'. The working of his power will enable us to make our own the words of the offertory antiphon: 'The Lord's right hand has proved its might; the Lord's right hand has raised me up'.²

¹ Jn 15, 18-21.

² Ps 117, 16, 17.

The fifth and sixth Sundays after the Epiphany treat the themes of power and weakness in quite a different setting. They reveal to us the mystery of the co-existence of good and evil in God's kingdom, and show how Christ's power brings about continual growth in the Church in spite of the weakness inseparable from her temporal existence.

The gospel of the fifth Sunday contains our Lord's parable of the wheat and tares. 'There was a man who sowed his field with cleanseed; but while the world was asleep an enemy of his came and scattered tares among the wheat, and was gone. So, when the blade had sprung up and come into ear, the tares too came to light'.¹ Christ sowed into the field of his Church nothing but the good clean seed of his holy word. Surely, then, the Church which grows from this seed will contain no evil but only good – no sinners, all saints? This is not so. There are sinners in the Church; there always have been and always will be – and not only among the laity but among the clergy too. There have been times in history when corruption was rife among bishops and there have even been popes notorious for their sinful lives. Very few, indeed, but nevertheless some. And the existence of even one presents a problem.

For the Church is the mystical body of Christ, the holy One; also she is the bride of Christ 'without spot or wrinkle'.² And she is made up of men. It would seem to follow that these men must be holy men. If the men who compose the Church are not holy, then the Church cannot be holy.

There would be something in this argument if the holiness of the Church were nothing other than the sum-total of the holiness of her members (and let us not forget that, though there are sinners in the Church there are also – and always have been – many of heroic sanctity). And that would be true if the Church herself were nothing but the sum-total of her members. But she is not; she has a head, Christ the holy One; and all holiness in the Church comes from him – even the holiness of those members who are saints. Their holiness is but a share in his. It is not they who make the Church holy, but he. Expressed otherwise, the holiness of individual members is but the sign or manifestation of that holiness which is intrinsic to the Church because she is Christ's body. The sinfulness of other members is but their failure to manifest the holiness which

¹ Mt 13, 24-27.

² Eph 5, 27.

is intrinsic to the Church. Their sins do not abolish that holiness – it is still there. But in them it is not shown forth.

This is so because of the nature of the Church which is not just a human institution. It did not come into being by the consensus of many people of similar views who decided to form a society for the propagation of virtue or the prevention of vice. The Church exists by the will of God who sent his own Son to found it; it has, independently of man, a divine force which purifies and sanctifies men and unites them with God in Christ. The sacraments and sacrifice of the Church are all Christ's acts, even though they be carried out by men; and they are not deprived of their sanctifying power even if those who administer them are unworthy in their personal lives. The word of God preached in the Church is life-giving and sanctifying just because it is God's word. Its power does not lie in the merits of the preacher. The Church, then, is essentially a creation of God through Christ in the Holy Spirit, and as such is essentially and intrinsically holy.

This does not alter the fact that the Church consists of people. She is made up of real men, leading human lives in particular circumstances of time and place. Because all of them are in contact with the divine sanctifying power of the Church they ought, indeed, to be personally holy. This is the ideal, and it will be attained in heaven. But not on earth. Human weakness steps in; and as long as men are living here below there is always the possibility of their exercising their free will (with which God does not interfere) in ways which conflict with the ideal. Though the power of God to sanctify is always at work in the Church, the weakness of man in collaborating is always in evidence too. There are saints in the Church, but also there are sinners.

Sinners can remain as members of the Church – they are not immediately cast out. This is what our Lord teaches in his parable of the wheat and the tares (as also in his other parable about the net containing fish both good and bad). The master of the field, apprised of the presence of the tares among his wheat, decided that they should be left there until the harvest. And so the Church will continue to endure the presence of sinners within her until the last day. What a comfort that should be to us who are conscious of our weakness for, as St. John says, 'Sin is with us; if we deny that, we are cheating ourselves. It means that truth does not dwell in us'.¹

¹ 1 Jn 1, 8.

For though tares cannot turn into wheat, sinners can turn into saints. 'The working of God's power' can effect this transformation if we avail ourselves of the grace offered to us. So we must ever heed what St. Paul says in the epistle of this same Mass: 'You are God's chosen people, holy and well beloved; the livery you wear must be tender compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; you must bear with one another's faults, be generous to each other, where somebody has given ground for complaint; the Lord's generosity to you must be the model of yours'.¹

While grieving about all sins (especially our own) which disfigure the fair countenance of the Church, we must never be scandalised at human weakness. Still less should we allow it to shake our faith in the Church. After all, our Lord foretold it, and it was exemplified even among his own apostles, of whom one failed him. As St. Augustine wrote: 'Let us recognize that ark which prefigured the Church; let us be the clean beasts in it, yet let us not refuse to allow the unclean ones to be carried in it with us until the end of the deluge ... Consequently, whenever anyone, because of the alleged uncleanness of some, leaves the gathering of unity, which is an ark carrying the clean and the unclean during the deluge, he shows that he is rather the sort of creature that flies away, like the raven'.²

When we come to the final Sunday after the Epiphany we are taught yet another lesson about the working of God's power in the Church. The epistle reminds us that she is to 'wait for the appearance of God's Son from heaven' – that is, for the *parousia* or second coming of Christ. Not until then will her task on earth be finished. Throughout all the time which is to elapse between her foundation and the *parousia*, the Church is to keep on growing. The 'working of God's power' will achieve this in spite of the human weakness which will never be absent. The process of growth had already begun among those to whom St. Paul was writing the epistle of this Mass. 'Our preaching to you did not depend on mere argument; power was there, and the influence of the Holy Spirit . . . and now you have become a model to all the believers throughout Macedonia and Achaia. Yes, the Lord's message has echoed out from you, and not only in Macedonia and Achaia; your faith in God has overflowed everywhere'.³

The 'everywhere' of St. Paul's day was a somewhat circumscribed locality; since then it has become 'everywhere' in a much fuller

¹ Col 3, 12–13.

² *Epist.* 108, 20; PL 33, 417.

³ 1 Thess 1, 5–8.

sense, for now there is hardly a country in the entire world wherein the Church of God has not been planted. Certainly there is a lot of growing to take place between now and the *parousia*, but already the Church shows very clearly that characteristic which our Lord described in the parables which occur in the gospel of this Mass.

He says that the Church is like a 'grain of mustard seed that a man has taken and sown in his ground; of all seeds none is so little, but when it grows up it is greater than any garden herb; it grows into a tree, so that all the birds come and settle in its branches'.¹ A tree, being a living organism, possesses an internal force which causes growth; it is not the leaves or branches which, by some power of their own, deposit matter onto the outside of the tree to thicken or lengthen it; rather is it the tree itself which utilizes roots and leaves to draw extraneous matter into itself to build this into its own living substance. So it is with the Church. Like the mustard tree she is a living organism. Her members are living only because they are vivified by her own internal life-principle, the Holy Spirit. It is his power which utilizes the members to draw others within the organism that these, too, may be built into the structure of the Church. The growth of the Church is not from external addition but from internal development, like that of a tree.

Birds of every kind come to settle in the branches of the mustard tree; so men of every race and nation will come to find their home in the Church – she is to be catholic, universal. 'While this city of God is in exile on earth', says St. Augustine, 'it enrolls its citizens from men of all nations and tongues. It does not worry about differences in culture, laws and way of life'.² The Church is catholic not only geographically and ethnically, but also culturally in the sense that she has entered into and, as it were, put on the successive forms of civilization which men have adopted since her foundation. She has grown into all times as well as into all places.

But the different aspects which the Church has presented while living through her Jewish, Greek, Roman, European and now universal phases have not been breaches in her continuity. One civilization may have taken the place of another, but it has never been that one church replaced a former church. Always it has been the the same Church, living through one phase into the next, and developing organically while doing so, just as a tree develops organically while changing its appearance. During the winter a tree may look

¹ Mt 13, 31-33.

² *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, ch. 17.

dead, but the coming of spring brings a marvellous change. Buds appear, and then leaves; later may come flowers and fruit; and even though, with the onset of autumn, the stripping of its leaves may seem to reduce the tree to its former condition, the fact is that the tree is not exactly the same as it was. Now it is bigger and stronger than it used to be; it has advanced one stage further towards its full growth. The changes in its appearance were not breaches in continuity – they were the signs of organic development directed towards the perfection of maturity.

And so it is with the Church. Externally she may seem to change; but in herself she is ever the same organism undergoing organic growth, purposefully advancing towards 'that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ'.¹ For, just as once Christ grew in his physical body, 'advancing in age and grace and wisdom before God and man',² so now he continues to grow in his mystical body, the Church. She is 'to become as it were the fulness and completion of the Redeemer, Christ in the Church being in some sense brought to complete achievement'.³ When this has taken place according to the proportions foreseen and willed by God, then the task of the Church here below will be finished. The Bridegroom will come in power and majesty to his bride, and 'all creation being subjected to his rule he will hand over to the Father a universal and everlasting kingdom – a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, of love and of peace.'⁴ Human weakness will exist no more; it will have been annihilated by 'the working of God's power'.

¹ Eph 4, 13.

² Lk 2, 52.

³ *Mystici Corporis* (C.T.S. Edition § 77).

⁴ Preface for the Feast of Christ the King.