POWER IN WEAKNESS

By LEONARD JOHNSTON

ST JOHN'S account of the conversation between our Lord and the Samaritan woman[1] contains several examples of the skill with which the evangelist combines historical realism and symbolic import. One of these occurs at the end of this conversation, when the return of the disciples gives the woman the opportunity to slip away, 'leaving there her water-pot' – so confused and excited that she forgets what she came for; but in any case she has found more than she went for, something which makes pointless the water she went to draw. And in exactly the same way, when the disciples offer our Lord the food they had gone to buy, he tells them that he has other food to eat.

Moreover, this amusing and penetrating interplay of ideas is pendant to one which occurs at the beginning of the scene. Our Lord opens his conversation with the woman by saying: 'Give me to drink'; but after a few moments of startling conversation, this scene closes with her words: 'Give me to drink'.

'Give me to drink . . . Give me to drink'. Our Lord's request is not merely a device to engage the woman in conversation. His thirst is real. It is not indeed a thirst which can be satisfied by the water from Jacob's well, from which even the cattle drink. But it is still a real thirst, a real request; and the request is answered precisely by the request which the woman is brought to make. He thirsts–for her thirst.

In these very simple and profound words, we have John's presentation of that essential characteristic of God which we call his 'goodness'. The idea of goodness may sometimes appear slightly confused, because it covers different aspects. It means something which is attractive, desirable, lovable, but also a more objective quality, something which is for our good; and the two are not always very evidently the same (as, for example, in the rather forbidding phrase: Take it, it's good for you). But when we say that God is good we mean first that all perfection, all beauty, all delight are in him. All: outside of him there is nothing. This goodness tends to overflow, *bonum diffusivum sui*. But this is not just a philosophic

[1] Jn 4, 5ff.

concept; his 'expansiveness' is not just an automatic process, like the expansion of gases, or like nature's abhorrence of a vacuum. There is a personal will involved – the quality of love. God is both good for us and good to us; in him, goodness and love overlap and indeed coincide. Because there is no other good for us but himself, because the nothingness is a void which is also a need, therefore his goodness is also an intense desire that we should cry out for him. He thirsts – for our thirst.

This characteristic of God – his desire to give – is the first thing that we know about him: 'In the beginning was the Word'. In the beginning, from eternity, God was speaking, was communicating, was communicating himself, was giving himself; and he gave himself totally – 'the word was God'. And after this God continues to speak, to give himself: an echo of his first Word produces creation, and the light of God's being shines where there was the darkness of non-being. And again he spoke to men, and this word too was a communication of himself; he becomes 'Emmanuel', God with us: 'Never was there any nation whose god was so close to it as our God is to us, in commandment and precept . . .'[1] And finally, the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us – God so loved the world that he gave himself to it in the person of his Son.

God is all; we are nothing. God is a giver – all we can do is receive; but God gives himself most fully where our need is greatest. This is the pattern of the divine action throughout the Bible. It is the pattern which emerges first at the first moment of Israel's existence, at the exodus. For then they were nothing – a rabble of slaves, without strength, without hope: and it was in their helplessness and need that God acted. This is why Israel is both a nation and a religion – because their birth as a nation is at the same time the beginning of a faith; it was in their liberation from Egypt that they came to know God. For the thing which was supremely clear about this liberation was that it was no doing of theirs – not by their own armed rebellion did they fight their way to freedom and national independence, not by their own strength and power, but solely by the mighty hand of God. This was a revelation that God is, and also a revelation of what sort of a God he is; the God of Israel is a saviour, one who acts where need is greatest: 'It was not because you were greater or more numerous than any other people that the Lord chose you, but simply because he loved you'.[2]

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[1] Deut 4, 17. [2] Deut 7, 17.

The words in which Israel tried to sum up this experience of God, words which recur ceaselessly throughout the Bible, are 'goodness and truth'. Goodness is that quality which we have already tried to grapple with; it means love, gratuitous love which is not motivated by any merits in its object, but solely by its needs; love which is therefore also mercy, loving-kindness, salvation. And this love is 'true' – reliable, unfailing. It is true because God is true; he is real, and indeed the only reality. Outside of him there is nothing, and outside of him there is no hope. This unfailing love, then, shows itself most clearly when all other hope has failed. 'If you do not hold fast to me, you will not stand fast'; these are the words that Isaiah holds out to the people in a moment of danger when the hearts of the people trembled 'as leaves tremble in the wind'.[1] As if he should say: To hold fast by anything else, strength of armies or political skill, is to hold on to a phantasm; only when all human hope is gone and hearts and hands are empty, only then are you completely safe, only then are you on firm ground, and you will stand fast.

'Horse and rider thou hast cast into the sea';[2] so Israel sang of God's victory at the exodus; but the same theme is taken up and developed in the canticle of Anna: 'The bow of the mighty is broken, the helpless are girt with strength. The hungry are fed, those who feasted are now in need. The barren woman is the mother of many, and the mother of many is forlorn. The Lord brings life and death, makes poor and rich, brings low and raises high, lifts up the lowly from the dust, the poor from the dung-hill, to make him sit with the great in the place of honour'.[3] So Anna, seeing in the birth of her son Samuel the working of the same principle – that where there is no human hope, there God acts; where there is barrenness, there God comes, 'life accompanying'. And as with Anna, so with Sara, and Rebekah, and Rachel, and the mother of Samson, and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. It was in barrenness that all these mothers brought forth sons through whom God's saving power would be displayed. So constant is the theme that in the exile the prophet speaks of Israel herself as one of these barren mothers, bereft of children and hope, and suddenly brought to new life by God: 'You shall say: Whence come these children to me? I was childless and barren; who gave me these sons? I was alone: whence come these to me . . . Shout for joy, thou who art barren and childless; burst out in cries of gladness, thou who hast not travailed. For

[1] Isai 7, 9. [2] Exod 15, 1. [3] 1 Sam 2, 4–8.

this desolate woman bears more sons than she who was married'.[1]

And all of this is finally fulfilled and explained when God gives himself to us most completely. He comes through a woman without human intervention. 'The Lord regarded the humility of his handmaid'; and therefore 'the holy one that shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Most High'.[2] This barrenness (even though in Mary it was voluntary) is the only fertile ground for God's action.

This, then, is the first law of the divine action: that God's power works most fully when it is unchallenged by any rival. Our part in this is stripping ourselves of any rival help. To prepare the way of the Lord is to remove obstacles – but anything that is not God is an obstacle. Anything in the world: this is in fact the sense of St John's use of the term world, in such phrases as: 'The world hates me';[3] 'The world was made by him, but the world knew him not';[4] 'I have taken you out of the world'.[5] This is not a blanket condemnation of the whole of mankind, from which only a few are exempted by separation from the normal lot of humanity, by being somehow transported out of this world. It is not even a condemnation of material pleasures and love of this world's goods. In St John, 'the world' is used as a sort of short-hand for 'the world and nothing more'. It sums up the attitude of those whose vision, whose needs and hopes, do not go beyond the horizon of this world. Their hopes are limited to what this world can give, and in their needs they rely on their own devising. An independent, self-sufficient attitude – this is what John means by 'the world'. Anything which is not of God, then, is 'the world', and is an obstacle to God. 'All that is in the world, the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, the pride of life, is not of the Father but of the world'.[6] And the christian life, what we call sanctity, is nothing else but this – to rid ourselves of everything, in order to leave free play to the action of God.

This is the meaning of christian humility, and why it is the only foundation for the christian life. It is not merely a recognition of our imperfections and our sins, our unworthiness in the sight of God's holiness. It is not merely the attitude of a feeble creature towards the Almighty Creator – not, at least, in the sense of a comparison of little with great. Christian humility is absolute. It is an effort to realise more and more clearly that we are nothing and God is everything. We are nothing – we have no wisdom, no strength, no

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[1] Isai 49, 21; 54, 1. [2] Lk 1, 35. [3] Jn 7, 7; 15, 18.
[4] Jn 1, 10. [5] Jn 15, 19. [6] 1 Jn 2, 16.

virtue. This too is one reason why penance is an essential element of the christian life – because it is one means of expressing this humility. It is not primarily a matter of quelling our wicked passions, it is not kill-joy fear of the pleasures of this world. It is the elimination in us of all that is 'the pride of life'; it is the assertion in practice of our nothingness. 'He who loses his life shall save it'.[1] Only when we have rid ourselves of every vestige of self-reliance, broken our pathetic clinging to those things which the Scriptures so well call 'vanity' – emptiness, delusion, only then can life really flourish in us.

Humility, and penance which is the expression of humility, are sometimes regarded as negative qualities – necessary no doubt, but only as means of removing obstacles to the more positive qualities of our spiritual lives. In a sense this is true; in the same sense as unlocking a door or burying a seed are negative actions; but unlocking a door is also opening it, and 'unless the seed dies it remains only a seed, but if it dies it brings forth much fruit'.[2]

Our Lord 'had to die and so enter into his glory'.[3] His death was necessary not merely as a sacrifice to avenge the insult men had offered to God, but because in no other way could he express the joyful and eager surrender of himself to the divine will. But this surrender is also an embrace. By his humiliation and death our Lord expressed to the uttermost of human capacity his love of God: 'Greater love than this no man has, than that he should lay down his life for his friends'.[4] But love means identification of wills; and to be of one will with God is to be one with God. That is why our Lord's death is his return to the glory of the Father – because in his death was expressed completely and finally that identification with the divine will which he had come on earth to display. 'Father, I have finished the work which you gave me to do. Now give me back that glory which I had with you before the world began'.[5] 'Christ had to die and so enter into his glory': just as his death is not merely satisfaction for sin in a juridical sense, so his glorification is not merely a reward for the price he had paid, but rather the result, the obverse of the coin, the flowering of the buried seed.

Our humility, too, is the denial of ourselves, which is at the same time an assertion of God. The mere negative rejection of human values is not humility but meanness of spirit, pusillanimity. True humility is the joyful, eager grasp of the infinite majesty of God.

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[1] Mt 16, 25. [2] Jn 12, 25. [3] Lk 24, 26.
[4] Jn 15, 13. [5] Jn 17, 4.

We are nothing, and we must learn to be nothing. Above all, we must learn not to rely on our own virtue. This is what underlies St Paul's apparently excessive vehemence against the law. It is because the 'temptation' to legal uprightness cut at the very root of this most basic principle of the divine action. As long as there is the faintest shadow of self-reliance in us, then God's action in us is hampered. 'For works, a return is due not as grace but as payment';[1] but the one thing most certain about our christian state is that it is a grace: 'God has imprisoned all men in sin – in order that he may have mercy on all'.[2] We must be found in Christ 'having not my justification which comes from the Law, but that which comes from faith in Christ'.[3] Faith itself is simply the word for this abandonment, this openness to receive God who gives: 'To those who receive him – to those who believe in his name – he gave the power to become sons of God'.[4] Faith is the acknowledgement of our need. Even the appeal of the Samaritan woman, 'Lord, give me to drink'. is no more than the echo of our Lord's own appeal – an echo from the abyss of nothingness to which he calls.

'This man welcomes sinners'; it was said of our Lord. That he should actually approve of sin is of course unthinkable; but in the sinners' evident lack of virtue, the absence of any claims of merit, our Lord finds room for his action. This too is the point of our Lord's words about children which have occasioned so many sentimental misconceptions. 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven': not primarily because of their innocence, or their trustfulness, or their obedience; but simply because of that which is most evident of childhood – that they are little; that they are weak; that they have none of these qualities, of strength or wisdom or honour, which make the 'great ones' objects of respect. 'Not many noble, not many wise, not many rich';[5] these are the ones on whom God's choice rests. 'He has chosen the weak to confound the strong, the foolish to confound the wise, and the things which are not to cast down those which are – that no flesh may boast against the Lord'.[6]

'A little flock', our Lord lovingly calls his church: wretched, helpless, unconsidered. But this does not mean sheep-like passivity. To be little does not mean pusillanimity. To empty ourselves of all self-reliance does not mean being reduced to spineless, depersonalised automata. Wealth, health, wit, virtue – these are not the person,

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[1] Rom 4, 4. [2] Rom 11, 32. [3] Phil 3, 9.
[4] Jn 1, 12. [5] 1 Cor 1, 26. [6] 1 Cor 1, 27–28.

but the *persona*, the apparatus and trappings of living. And once we have disengaged our anxious grasp, once we have reached the depths of hopelessness and helplessness, then we reach rock bottom and find ourselves on solid earth. And on this foundation, God will build. 'Unless the Lord build the house, they labour in vain who build it'.[1] The foundation of this building is Christ – the stone which the builders rejected. 'Who, being in the form of God, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient even to the death of the cross: wherefore God has exalted him . . .'[2] This is the prototype and model and the means of our abasement and our strength. Through his emptying of himself, our Lord prepared the way for God's glory to shine through him. And we too, 'as living stones joined to this stone',[3] are built up into the house of God, the place where his glory dwells. After the denial and rejection of all human values – the will of the flesh, the will of man – God does in us what he did in Christ, what he did even within the Blessed Trinity itself: he pours himself out into us, so that we become sons of God as Christ is Son of God.

On this foundation God builds. In our weakness is God's power.[4] Our life in Christ consists of the interplay of these two elements, the depth of our need and the abundance of his grace, his desire to give and our desire to receive. We carry in us the death of Jesus, that his life may be seen in us.[5] Our Lord says of himself: 'The Son cannot do anything of himself'.[6] He has no will of his own, he does not seek his own glory. But this annihilation and abnegation is the correlative of the action of God in him: 'The Son cannot do anything – except what he sees the Father doing; but the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does; just as the Father gives life, so he has given the Son power to give life'.[7] And we too, once we have thrown away the pitiful weapons with which we thought to work, will find our hands filled with the power of God who made the world, the power of Christ who raised the dead: 'The works that I do, you also shall do, and greater than these'.[8]

'If you did but know the gift of God', our Lord said to the woman of Samaria. But the gift of God is God's own life; and of this gift, only our Lord is the full measure, in whom the fulness of the godhead dwells in bodily form. It is God's nature to give; and our Lord is the sacrament – the visible and effective sign – of that giving. When

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[1] Ps 126, 1. [2] Phil 2, 6–9. [3] 1 Pet 1, 5. [4] Cf 2 Cor 12, 10.
[5] 2 Cor 4, 10. [6] Jn 5, 19. [7] Jn 5, 19–22. [8] Jn 14, 12.

we say that our Lord is 'sent', we mean very much more than that he is God's envoy, or that he has come to do a task or to give a message. He is the full expression of God's sending: 'He who sees me, sees the Father who sent me'.[1] 'This is eternal life, to know God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent'.[2] 'He who believes in the one who sent me has eternal life'.[3] The word 'sent' in these phrases does not express merely an action which God has performed or a role which our Lord played. It expresses the quality of the persons. God is a sender, and our Lord is what he sends.

God is always sending, he is always giving himself to the world in Christ. And our Lord is always sent, he is always coming. His coming as man is not a historical event which we commemorate; it is the source from which we receive God's giving of himself: 'If you did but know the gift of God, it would become in you a fountain of life springing up into eternal life'. The season of Advent is a representation of the whole christian life, stretched out between the coming of our Lord as man and his coming in the full glory of eternal life. Our response to that coming is an eager longing: 'Lord, give me to drink', the cry from the abyss of nothingness which only he can fill – but which he fills with himself.

[1] Jn 12, 45. [2] Jn 17, 3. [3] Jn 5, 24.