

THE POOR IN SPIRIT

By WILLIAM LAWSON

THERE is a proverb about sending a boy to do a man's job. God sent a baby.

We are no longer astonished, still less terrified, at the birth of Christ. We look at it with hindsight, when it has been justified by the glory of the resurrection and the indestructibility of the Church. The nativity has become the happiest of the christian feasts, and the easiest. Shepherds and lambs at the stable give it an attractive simplicity: wise men from the east bring mystery and colour: the angels start the tradition of cradle songs. Christ is too small to make demands, and his silent presence soothes and reassures. He is God, and the shadow of the cross is upon him: but the incarnation is no longer a puzzle to us, and the manner of it is heart-warming and homely.

But this is the beginning of Christ's kingdom. The whole world has to be recovered for God; the human race has to be brought back to obedience to its creator; darkness is upon the face of the earth, and Christ must be every man's light. And God has sent a baby.

The Jews have hardened their hearts; the Romans are being corrupted with wealth and power; the barbarians are massing on the frontiers. 'A child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder'.¹ What hope should we have had of salvation had we been present at Christ's advent?

It is hard to abstract from our satisfaction in what Christ has accomplished, and to see his birth as a fresh event with its future still uncertain. An examination of modern practices we adopt or approve of may enable us to see the nativity as though for the first time.

Human prudence comes naturally to us; and to use it in the Church as well as in the world is right. Our Lord mentions it without reproach: 'Which of you, having a mind to build a tower, doth not first sit down and reckon the charges that are necessary, whether he have the wherewithal to finish it: Lest, after he hath laid the foundation and is not able to finish it, all that see it begin to mock

¹ Isai 9, 6.

him, saying: This man began to build and was not able to finish'.¹ That is one part of the gospel to which we can conform ourselves without effort – indeed without any change at all. It stands to reason. Industry, commerce, government, ecclesiastical administration and the apostolate all work on the same lines. An opportunity has to be taken or a need has to be met: the size of the task is estimated, and resources are measured: a plan is made which puts the best man in charge and gives him the helpers and the equipment he needs. To act otherwise would be wrong: it would be flying, as we say, in the face of Providence. Yet it is not Providence's own way.

Humanly speaking, our Lord was not adequate for his task. As a baby he could not be expected to govern his kingdom: but he started deprived of much that could have helped towards a later assumption of royal power – royal status, recognition by civil authorities, influential family and friends. Christ had none of the advantages provided for those destined to secular authority. His place of birth was not chosen by his mother and his fosterfather but was decided by the Roman emperor.

In those days there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled . . . And all went to be enrolled every one into his own city. And Joseph went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary his espoused wife, who was with child. And it came to pass that when they were there, her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.²

He was welcomed – by shepherds. They represented nobody: and when they quitted the stable they disappeared from the gospel and the history of Christ's kingdom. His parents 'carried him to Jerusalem, to be presented to the Lord'³ in fulfilment of the law; as though he were not the Son of God and the lawgiver. There he was recognized again – by Simeon, for whom the child's arrival was an intimation that he could depart this life in peace, and by Anna, who, at eighty-four, could offer only her own allegiance for her remaining years. The wise men from the east adored Christ; but whatever

¹ Lk 14, 28.

² Lk 2, 1-7.

³ Lk 2, 22.

publicity they might have given him was lost when they returned to their far country, avoiding Jerusalem. They too, like the shepherds, and Simeon and Anna, acknowledge Christ for themselves alone, and vanish from the scene. They leave him as solitary as when he first appeared, and they are beyond call when he needs them. The only powerful person who took notice of Christ's coming was Herod. To him, Christ was a nameless existence threatening his security. He drove him into exile, without even knowing what he had done. In exile the child had no party: he was nobody's 'king over the water'. Birth, flight, and return were the private affairs of an obscure little family. They caused no stir at all.

By our standards, the timing of the divine plan of salvation is all wrong. Preparations for a secular event are entrusted to experts in the art of arousing interest and enlisting aid. Even a trivial event like the release of a new film is prepared for in detail – stories planted in the press, contrived 'sensations' involving the principal actors, interviews on television, the patronage of people in the news. Our Lord had forerunners from the fall of man onwards: there were centuries of preparation for his coming. Eve was promised the triumph of one of her descendants over evil: the promise was renewed in God's covenants with the patriarchs: the prophets gave the signs by which the redeemer should be known – and then Christ slipped into the world unheralded. It was at his death and resurrection that the advance publicity was referred to him. His descent from David was known at his birth only to his immediate family and the census-officials. Only Mary and Joseph knew of the fulfilment of the prophecy, 'A virgin shall conceive and bear a son'.¹ No claim was made at the time of the birth concerning the fulfilment of the prophecy of Micheas about Bethlehem.² The wise men's gifts, foretold in the messianic psalm,³ were offered on a private occasion, and did not publicly recommend Christ as the promised king. There was no advantage to him in Herod's slaughter of the children, because no-one connected him with it and with the prophecy of Jeremias.⁴ His return from exile was secret, and he was not hailed as the Son of God according to the words 'out of Egypt have I called my son'.⁵

God's ways are clearly not our ways. An attempt to understand the difference is as clearly required from us. If we were not immedi-

¹ Isai 7, 14; Mt 1, 23.

⁴ Jer 31, 15; Mt 2, 18.

² Mic 5, 1; Mt 2, 6.

⁵ Hos 11, 1; Mt 2, 15.

³ Ps 71.

ately aware of the contrast between the advent of Christ the King and the royal state of some of his vicars, endless criticism over the centuries would bring it to our notice. No judgement on the possession by the papacy of extensive temporal sovereignty would be accepted by all committed christians. The popes themselves from St. Peter onwards, were they assembled to debate the rights and wrongs of papal sovereignty, and the claims and policies of such as Gregory VII, Innocent III, Boniface VIII, the popes of the renaissance, Pius VI, Pius IX and so on, would need an army of historians and canon lawyers to inform and advise, and even so would never reach a unanimous verdict. But at least the divine example ought to be consciously invoked in every age to restrain the inevitable tendency to worldliness. The Christmas feast is an annual challenge to those in authority in Christ's kingdom on earth.

It should also be for any christian an occasion for examining his participation in the work of the incarnation, to see if it is as Christ-like as he can make it. The circumstances of our Lord's coming into the world are apparently so unhelpful for the foundation of his kingdom that they fail to extend it, but leave us in the presence of Christ solitary, unsupported and unable to help himself. Should we not, on that account, try to see what our own part in the kingdom would be, were we, like Christ, alone and helpless?

To see ourselves as weak is not an exercise of imagination but a simple facing of fact. We are weak. Christ as a man, with his divinity poured away, has no worth in himself which is independent of God.¹ He is, in all his human being, subject to God. Self-reliance over against God is a corruption of man's nature which God abhors. There are no 'mighty' before God. Our Lady understood her relationship perfectly, and put it plainly in the Magnificat:² and the truth which she grasped at once is often repeated in the New Testament. If human beings give themselves credit for anything, they are false in themselves and false in their attitude to God. Their very life and all its qualities belong to God, and are ground only for self-abasement. 'What hast thou that thou hast not received, and if thou hast received it why dost thou glory?'³ God in his justice and kindness rejects the pretensions of the self-sufficient. 'He that exalteth himself shall be humbled, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted'.⁴ 'He has cast down the mighty from their thrones and raised up the lowly'.⁵ Apparent superiority, our Lord teaches,

¹ Phil 2, 3.

² Lk 1, 48.

³ 1 Cor 4, 7.

⁴ Mt 23, 12.

⁵ Lk 1, 52.

should be put in its place with acts of service. 'He who would be first amongst you let him be your servant'.¹ St. James warns against attaching importance to secular and temporal distinctions.² There is a passage of our Lord's teaching particularly apposite in a consideration of his birth and childhood, and of his kingdom. 'The disciples came to Jesus, saying: Who, thinkest thou, is the greater in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus calling unto him a little child, set him in the midst of them, and said: Amen I say to you, unless you be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, he is the greater in the kingdom of heaven'.³

To be little like a child is to be wholly dependent. Our Lord was dependent on his mother in the usual way of babies. He had no plans of his own, and not even an effective will of his own. That is our place in the kingdom, and we should know and accept it. We arrive by God's will: we are on loan to ourselves from him: we can neither live nor act without him: whatever we do of good is no reason for self-glorification. 'We are unprofitable servants: we have done only what we were bound to do',⁴ and we have done it, moreover, in the power of God. Only in that way of humility can we fit into God's plan. If we are full of ourselves there is no room for God. Self-esteem is a false estimate of ourselves, and it closes mind and heart against the infusion by God of knowledge of Christ and his kingdom. God 'hides these things from the wise and prudent, and reveals them to little ones'.⁵

But 'slaves', 'unprofitable servants' and 'children' as we are, we belong to a divine plan of action. We are under authority: we owe obedience. The consequence of Christ's humanity is that he is made obedient: it is to do God's will that he is born. 'Wherefore when he cometh into the world he saith: Behold I come. In the head of the book it is written of me that I should do thy will, O God'.⁶ Like Christ we come into the world to do God's will; and we accept the work in the sacraments of baptism and confirmation. To do our work effectively we must keep the relationship of children to God, and 'the spirit of his Son in our hearts, crying: Father'.⁷

The core of that relationship is an awareness of God and a permanent readiness to do his will. In any apostolate the primary fact is that every christian is wanted here and now for work to which he

¹ Mt 20, 27.

² Jas 1, 9.

³ Mt 18, 1-4.

⁴ Lk 17, 10.

⁵ Mt 11, 25.

⁶ Heb 10, 5-7.

⁷ Gal 4, 4.

is appointed by God. All other facts are secondary – the extent and difficulty of the task, and the apostle's competence.

If the secondary facts were allowed to decide whether christians should embark on defence or extension of the kingdom, it would have collapsed long since. Had Christ waited until his foundation could be guaranteed, with support promised and helpers enlisted, we should not now have a kingdom to defend. The duty of bringing light and truth into a world which prefers darkness, and will not see, is fixed by God's will. It is as well to look for dangers and obstacles in the way: but, however forbidding they may be, God's will must be done. Any other course is cowardly, slothful and proud. 'There is a lion outside. If I go out I may be killed':¹ that excuse is shameful.

It is safe to say that the Church, and christians generally, are never, by worldly standards, equal to the labours that lie before them. If all christians were fully committed, and fully available to serve God, how could acknowledgement of Christ be won from dedicated communists, jews, mohammedans and other non-christians, and from those with no religion at all? Where are priests and laymen to be found who could recover the lost christians of South America? What spiritual power can prevail against determined materialism in international and national politics, in business and social life? How can a christian voice be heard above the clamour of press, television and radio? Who can persuade a reluctant world to accept the hard doctrines that marriage is indissoluble, that contraception is wrong in itself, that chastity is a requirement of human nature, that all human beings have universal, inviolable and inalienable rights?

There is a lion in the way: but that is not the apostle's worry. He has been clearly summoned: and he must answer his Father and go about his Father's business. The first apostles were ludicrously inadequate to the conversion of the Roman empire. Their successors had, in proportion, a greater number of barbarians to evangelize than we have today. Augustine of Canterbury undertook a campaign as difficult as the re-conversion of South America. Francis Xavier had pitifully small forces for the christianizing of the far East. Inadequacy, measured by counting heads and making an inventory of material resources, is almost an essential quality in apostolic undertakings. It does follow the divine pattern. God worked on human history to bring it to the 'fulness of time': and Christ

¹ Prov 22, 13.

came in the fulness of time. Had man co-operated with God, the world would have been ready to welcome Christ and to be fulfilled in him. The inadequacy of that first divine mission came from the world and not from Christ: and he made his own fulness of time, as christians must make their own, by his efficacious love of all whom he met – his mother and his family, shepherds, wise men, departing servants like Simeon and Anna. The apostolate can perhaps be big business: but it is nothing if it is not the love of one person for another under the providence of God.

Christ came in the fulness of time: but he was also ahead of his time, as christianity must always be. His doctrine was human perfection in love of God and of people, and that is always farther than human beings have yet gone, and farther than the mass of them want to go. The Church must suffer the fate of those born ahead of their time – to be denied realization of their future, and to live frustrated in a backward present.

The same fate has befallen many inside the Church. Though the mystical body of Christ is always more mature historically than any human institution, not all her members have the dynamic force of zeal. Many take the pace which is set by secular society. They may not be worldly in the worst sense, but they have adopted habits of thought and action which are easy, comfortable and placid. They cling to the world they know. Not for them exile and adventure in foreign fields. Anything new is unacceptable because its newness disturbs their security. St. Paul having trouble over his mission to the gentiles is the first of an endless series of innovators opposed for their departure from an external tradition. Every monastic founder has been for a time suspect for his new ideas; every monastic reformer has come up against the inertia of mediocrity in his efforts to establish perfection. In the history of ideas, the accepted authors are given a quasi-scriptural authority, and new views are resented because they demand the re-thinking and re-phrasing of the truth. Thomas Aquinas was not generally accepted in his own lifetime. Now he is a bible. The Jesuit projects for the conversion of the far east, personified in Ricci and de Nobili, were condemned by the Roman authorities. Something like them is now proposed – late in the day – for missionary countries with a strong culture of their own.

Not all innovators are devoted followers of Christ, and wise besides. But in philosophy, theology, the ancillary sciences, liturgy, music, architecture, catechetics, missionary methods and government there have been, and are, thorough christians, sound in doc-

trine, who find obstacles across their path: lethargy, fear of anything new, authority for its own sake. They are not the first to have such an experience: Christ was too advanced for his contemporaries.

He came unto his own, and his own received him not'.¹ He was driven into exile. He was rejected many times before he was put out of the way. But he never ceased to do the will of God and to preach the kingdom.

The principle is beyond doubt, that the labourer must work in the vineyard till God takes him out of it. It is not the labourer's special talents, their suitability and their success which God wants, but just his presence as an obedient child. The child does not make his circumstances, decide his course, and ensure his success. That belongs to the Father.

Neither does the child make himself. He finds himself ready made: and whatever he does in life has to be done with that self and no other. If he waits to be perfect before starting work, he will never start – and he will never be perfect, because perfection is arrived at by using oneself in obedience to God. It is reasonable to assess one's talents before choosing a career, and to avoid courses for which one is not equipped: but anyone who is alive has an ability to live, and any christian can be an apostle. The requirement is not to be this or that, but just to be. The child does not complain to his father of the way he has been made: he accepts his life, and lives it in his father's care.

'O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it: Why hast thou made me thus? Or hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour?'² The christian is wanted by God as God has made him, not as he would have chosen to make himself. He has a divine commission at this time, in this place, with this array of gifts, with these weaknesses and limitations. No-one can possibly be fully equipped for all his duties and all emergencies. Obstacles in the way may be insurmountable: authority to which obedience is due may oppose laudable projects or ruin them with neglect: the christian may fail in health of body or mind, or in virtue. But when a duty is there to be done, not only is it to be tackled, it is doable. God does not ask the impossible: what he asks the christian to do, the christian can do.

Insufficiency and weakness are pointers to the basic truth about

¹ Jn 1, 11.

² Rom 9, 20-21.

the human being that he is completely dependent on God, and that his primary humility is to be poor in spirit, to admit and welcome that dependence so that he is always in the presence of God, ready to receive whatever help God may choose to give him. The christian, like any other human being, only has to be himself, maintaining the necessary relationship with God, wanting to do God's will, and accepting God's enabling power. Abilities are not needed beyond what God has given: had more been necessary, God would have bestowed them already. External success is not asked for: it is in God's gift. Nobody should complain of God's demand that he be himself.

It is stupid to compare one person's apostolate with another's. Every human being is unique in personality, and all apostolates are necessarily individual. That one person is stronger and another weaker should matter to neither of them: each must be his unique self towards God. And if towards God, then towards people as well: the christian apostolate is the double dedication to God and to the people of God. The apostolate in fact is simple: it is, in Christ, his love of the Father and the Paraclete, and of the whole human race – his mother and foster-father, the shepherds, the wise men, Simeon and Anna, Herod and the Innocents, the Jews and the Egyptians. He was engaged fully in the apostolate from the moment of his birth.

The apostolate is within the reach of every christian, and God calls every christian to engage in it. Evil in the world makes it the more necessary; fewness of apostles asks for more intense love from each one; frustration in great enterprises should turn the sufferer to people, who are always present and always in need. Certain qualities of character and temperament are a help in love of people, and not all christians possess them: but they are subsidiary. 'If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal'.¹ What matters is charity. In dependence upon God, charity can be every christian's life and work.

¹ 1 Cor 13, 1.