

# LIVING BY FAITH

By MICHAEL KYNE

IT is a paradox of the christian life that its end and purpose, which is 'to attain to the measure and the full stature of Christ'<sup>1</sup> according to the will of the Father and through the power of his Spirit, seems constantly thwarted by the human and individual limitations and inadequacies which the divine will imposes upon us or permits to remain in us. But instead of accepting the fact that it is the Spirit who will fill us with all his fullness and accomplish his purpose in us in his own good time and his own mysterious way,<sup>2</sup> we are constantly attempting to escape from our limitations by merely human means.

One of the commonest of these is to cut down people and things to a size comparable to or less than our own. At its worst, this can be a real butchery, a conscious dismembering of someone to give us a sense of mastery over them. At its best, it can be a good-humoured teasing aimed at someone's unfounded pretentions and poses. In either case, we turn a blind eye to changes in ourselves, in others and in the world around us, in order to make everything conform to the self that we approve, or at least are accustomed to. We have our own interests, and we absorb only what pleases us or fits in with our own ideas. The result, of course, is that we impose upon ourselves a far more radical limitation than that which God has imposed, by effectively preventing the Holy Spirit from furthering our growth across every human encounter. Christ himself, who grew in wisdom as well as in age,<sup>3</sup> deepened his human knowledge of his Father's creation through human encounter, in the process of living this mortal life. For us, as for him, the business of living requires that we adjust ourselves to the pressures of life, and common sense demands that we recognize our inadequacy.

Christ himself, 'who must needs become altogether like his brethren',<sup>4</sup> was careful not to transgress the custom, rule and routine according to which the devout Jew of his day lived his life. For us too, rule and routine can be of immense assistance in the constant adjustment that ordinary living requires of us. It can liberate us for

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<sup>1</sup> Eph 4, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Eph 3, 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Lk 2, 52.

<sup>4</sup> Heb 2, 17.

larger tasks and problems, freeing us for a deeper penetration into the richness of God's revelation of himself. But here again we are constantly tempted to cut things down to our own size. We have our routine of spiritual duties and apostolic work which we regard as the unalterable structure of our lives, despite all the changes going on within ourselves and the world around us.

We thus reduce the mystery and paradox of our life with God to a commonplace which provokes no reaction and needs no conscious thought and very little effort. To a certain extent, this is inevitable in the very continuity of christian life; but if there is to be an integral growth, much more is needed. There has also to be an openness in our lives, a readiness to welcome new experiences and to modify our attitudes and activities accordingly. In order to do this consistently, to preserve this openness even in the midst of our daily routine, we must pause occasionally to consider our lives as a whole. We must stand back and see how plans have worked out in practice, consciously assimilate new elements, and review the old with the eyes of a person who has grown.

The annual retreat can be the ideal time for just such a work of integrating into our lives the richness acquired by experience and of disposing ourselves to profit more by future experience. Rightly understood, the retreat is not some sort of spiritual stocktaking, but a time for intensifying our efforts to keep our lives open and supple to the activity of God. It is easy to run our spiritual lives in a way which satisfies us but which does not lead to real growth. How easily we can reduce the vast mystery of Providence, the eternal will of God in action, to comfortable dimensions! We can make of it a sort of nebulous feeling of love which we reserve for times of prayer, within which we relax and think that we are abandoning ourselves to God, whereas we are really behaving as if neither we nor others nor the movements in the world had any positive role within that Providence. Or we can reduce Providence to the letter of the law, identifying it with our own spiritual duties, which we have to obey only in order to fulfil all justice. Providence can become a merely episodic intervention of God in our lives, to which we advert to only when it is forced upon our notice. We call Providence only what we think we can recognise as Providence.

But the infinitely powerful activity of God, constantly at work at the very heart of creation, can never be reduced to human categories or measured by human standards. God does not merely put the finishing touches on our human work, or intervene like a benevolent

coach, to correct us gently when we are making mistakes. The initiative in our lives as a whole comes from God. It is we who are called to lose ourselves in the mystery of his eternal work. We co-operate with him and he works through us. Far from attempting to contain the Providence of God within our own meagre grasp we must allow ourselves to be taken out of ourselves by the very vastness of the work of God. Before him our attitude has to be one of adoration and wonderment, which is the beginning of contemplation. The initiative is his. We, for our part, must continually strive to walk in his ways which are not ours, and accept them more and more in love and faith. The mystery is that he can and does work in us and through us, despite the imperfection of our lives.

To say that God's ways are not our ways does not mean that we are in complete ignorance of the way in which he is at work in this world. God's plan is made manifest in Christ, the Word of God which reveals his thoughts and designs to man. Christ himself is the way of God in history; in him the secret of God is laid bare. He is the master-thought and master-plan behind all God's action. These are phrases which we have heard a hundred times; they have become part of our routine thinking; by attempting to fit them into a category, we deprive them of their real meaning.

Living according to the gospel means the constant acceptance of the fact that God's redeeming plan in Christ is foolishness to the worldlywise and an obstacle in the path of the ambitious. All too often, our approach to the Gospel leads us to transpose the life of Christ from the normal world, which is his and ours, into a realm of melodrama. We read the account of the passion and death as spectators, not as people who are personally caught up in the events recounted. We may imagine that it is the result of deep faith to be no longer baffled by the mystery that 'divine folly is wiser than the wisdom of men, and divine weakness stronger than man's strength'.<sup>1</sup> It can be merely the result of reducing the dimensions of the mystery, so that it never touches our day-to-day existence. There is no obstacle or scandal if the world of Christ is not our world. There is no difficulty in paying lip-service to the cross as the means of salvation, as long as it is not the pattern which repeats itself in the process of our personal salvation and of the salvation of the world. But once we seriously accept that we have to be 'closely fitted into the pattern of his death',<sup>2</sup> then there is foolishness and scandal.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 1, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Phil 3, 10.

Living by faith means to believe in practice that what happened to Christ and what came about through him must also be brought about in our own lives. We must feel the apparent injustice of the treatment meted out to Christ as deeply as we feel about the injustice which affects us personally. Only faith can accept the scandal of hearing the words 'This is my beloved Son', and afterwards seeing that Son, under the guidance of an all-powerful Father, advancing in deepening loneliness and helplessness, till he dies on a cross, rejected by the sins of ordinary men, without comfort from his Father. Only faith can see that where the misunderstanding, injustice and hatred of mankind broke over Christ and seemed to obliterate his work, there precisely was the crux of God's victory of life and love.

We need prayer to penetrate into the depths of this mystery, to accept its working in our own lives and in the life of the Church. We have to accept God's plan as valid not only for Christ but for his body the Church, of which we are here and now the living manifestation. We need the light of Christ to enable us to see that where sin and its effects, the cruelty, hate and suffering within the world, deform men and dismember the Church, at that very point Christ's victory continues in time and space. We have to make our act of faith in Christ an act of faith in the fact that where the weakness, selfishness and ingratitude of others seem to spoil my work and hinder my prayer, there God can be working out their and my salvation.

We have to say 'Father' to a God whom we feel could change everything and yet does not. Indeed we must go further even than that, and learn to accept fully the fact that God could change everything in our favour – 'even now he will send more than twelve legions of angels to my side'<sup>1</sup> – and not want him to do so. The scriptures must be fulfilled, God's plan must work itself out in time and through human agents, not by means of some thunderbolt from on high. Here we touch the point where the cross enters into our daily lives through the stupidity, pettiness, blindness and obstinacy of humanity, ourselves included. The real 'cross' is never the one which we make to our own measurements. It is the one on which we are awkwardly distended, the faults we would like to eliminate but cannot, the situation which is not ideal, the problem which admits of no solution; in short, it is the constant awareness of my own in-

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 26, 53.

sufficiency and inadequacy in one or other aspect of my life. To live in Christ means to face up to the dimensions of the problem of our own personal inadequacy on a human level, to commit ourselves to the task of saving the world or even our own souls, and still to believe that God can work and win the victory through that same inadequacy.

This attitude of faith is one that shatters human complacency; it drives us out of the comfortable positions in which we have taken refuge. There is often a stage in our spiritual lives when we are tempted to remain on Thabor and contain ourselves within the limits of present and past accomplishments. Few of us can really envisage the possibility of losing all. We are quite prepared to admit that Christ lost all to gain all, but we do not admit to ourselves that our own lives should be a repetition of the same story: 'Never Lord . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Each of us has a task to perform which is a human work. There is a parish or a school to be run, a church to be built, a magazine to be edited, a house to be organised and cleaned. Into that work we have to put the best of ourselves in terms of human efficiency. A school is not automatically successful because it is taken over by priests or religious. Public speaking which is confused and inaudible is not less irritating because it happens to be a sermon in church. The fact that work is being done for God means that we must use every possible human means to further it. But at the same time we must admit that human efficiency is not necessarily divine efficacy. We can never reduce the spreading of the kingdom of God to the level of a well-run business organisation. Yet it is all too easy to make a god of efficiency and attempt to confine the mystery of salvation within the limits of statistics. God means us to take encouragement from success in our work, but we must be careful not to use this encouragement as a shield against the unique source of christian courage: the passion and death of Christ.

Christ allowed Peter, James and John to witness his transfiguration in order that they might witness his degradation in the garden of the agony. The lesson which they learnt in retrospect was that the only way in which the transfiguration could become a permanent reality in the lives of all men was through the death of Christ. Had he stayed with them on Thabor there would have been just the four of them alone, and history would have passed them by. But through the cross Christ, risen and glorious, was given to the whole world.

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 16, 22.

The Christ whom they had wanted to contain within the limits of their own love and devotion escaped them; but at the same time he took them with him and, making them his Church, gave himself through them to history for all ages. It was necessary for Christ to suffer; necessary for them to lose him if they were going to find him as he wanted to be found. Thereafter they could 'rejoice that they had been found worthy to suffer indignity for the sake of Jesus' name'.<sup>1</sup>

The mystery of Christ is the mystery of each individual member of the Church and the mystery of the Church in her totality. Before the immense scandal of the cross we need have no fears about our own limitations and insufficiency. The divinity of Christ is shown not merely because he is risen and glorious, but because his life was born of death; only God can bring life out of death. The presence of the Spirit is made manifest in the Church not simply because of her holiness but because this holiness grows out of the sinfulness of her members. On a human level the man who has gone from rags to riches can afford to boast about his humble beginnings, for they enhance his success. But somehow we find it difficult to admit that spiritually we have come along the same road, from utter poverty to the richness of life in Christ. We diminish the mystery of the Church by trying to turn a blind eye to the defects of her members and of her rulers. We try to bolster up our own spiritual lives by excluding our own weaknesses from immediate consciousness. We find it difficult or morbid to pray about sin, not because we are sinless but because we fear to look our inadequacy in the face. That fear is born of a lack of understanding of the greatness of the power of God. It can often indicate to us that we are in reality basing our spiritual lives on our own efforts rather than on the power of God. We are doing our will and not his, finding ourselves and not him in our work. The one reality in our lives which reveals our pretence is sin; and therefore we are always reluctant to look at it. In the same way we can be afraid of looking at the changing face of the Church in the twentieth century. But we must conquer that fear and not dread losing a church we have created for ourselves in order to find the Church which God is building through the Spirit.

In our prayer, over and again we must be ready to reject routine habits, unafraid of launching out into the unknown and apparently unprofitable deep. Many souls who complain of aridity in prayer,

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 5, 41.

who spend their time in resigning themselves to 'never getting anything out of prayer' and piously accept dryness as a cross from God, are in reality their own worst enemies. They are trying to conserve their gains in prayer, to bury the talent the Lord has given them, instead of risking it in order to gain more. They cling to ways of praying which they have found helpful even when they are obviously no longer helpful, because fear and routine rob them of all spiritual initiative. They are afraid of doing something they have never done before. They profess to live by faith but demand from God constant reassurance. Their agony and their cross is a false one. Their struggle and suffering is not that fruitful christian birth out of death, but rather a sterile and hopeless struggle against the real death to self that God is asking of them. They are struggling against God because they have become preoccupied with themselves instead of keeping their eyes fixed upon Christ.

We are disconcerted when we find that our spiritual life is escaping our grasp. Perhaps we accuse ourselves of backsliding, and try to recover lost ground by encumbering ourselves with additional resolutions which soon fade. What we fail to see is that God is attempting to take us out of our routine by directing our attention to him. Even the tiniest glimpse of the reality of God, whom no man can look upon and live, will be a shattering experience; and we must not be afraid of being shattered. The very routine of our lives makes this process possible if we look upon that routine as a means of directing ourselves towards a deeper experience of God, rather than a means of insulating ourselves from all shocks. The mystery of Christ is ours. But unlike him we embody within ourselves contradictions to the work that we share with him. Original sin and our personal sins have misshapen us. The reshaping of our lives and of our work by the power of the Spirit will inevitably follow the pattern of the history of salvation. The only constants that we must seek to preserve in our lives are those which enable us to live in the spirit of continual re-creation. Faith indeed seeks understanding; but it is the understanding that Christ is continually inviting us to lose ourselves in the mystery of his infinite love.