AS SHEEP IN THE MIDST OF WOLVES

By PAUL EDWARDS

One day, Christ's disciples asked him an important question: 'Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven'? To us the tone of this query may be naive. But it does not lose its importance because of the ingenousness which prompted it. The disciples were frankly ambitious and wanted to know what qualities would take them to the highest rank in the new kingdom.

Christ answered them in the hebrew manner with a vivid demonstration, a kind of acted parable. 'And calling to him a child he put him in the midst of them and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven'.[1]

The scene is a familiar one, frequently referred to but hardly ever adequately reflected upon or expounded. It has a considerable sentimental appeal, since it appears to fit the romanticism in which most of us have been reared. 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy'. But the gospels are not sentimental. Christ did not make much of children because of the attractive quality which they share with puppies and kittens and indeed most young animals. And Wordsworth's view of life, wherein the child 'trailing clouds of glory' originally, must quite inevitably 'forget the glories he has known', is not christian. The christian life is not an inevitable decline from youthful purity. It is directly the opposite. We are born in original sin, baptised, come to the age when we can receive the eucharist and be confirmed, advance to matrimony or holy orders, progressing more deeply into the Church's life and advancing to the beatific vision. We move towards that vision, not away from it.

Christ's lesson is neither romantic nor sentimental; it is uncomfortably stark. The child is the greatest in the kingdom of God because he has nothing and is nobody. For the disciples the supreme achievement in the kingdom meant being more important in it than

[1] Mt 18, 2–3.

anyone else. Christ points to the child as one who has no standing at all in the world. Far from being a great ruler or priest or rabbi, he is not even an adult. He has no possessions. His clothes, his food, his place on the floor at night, are things for which he is totally and daily dependent on others. The child has nothing except his life and the expectation that others will provide for him. It is this dependence which constitutes his title to the first place in the kingdom.

It is important to notice that our Lord acted this parable for his apostles in the precise context of their apostleship. 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me'.[1] We are dealing here with the mission of Christ from his Father and the apostle's mission from Christ. To become a member of Christ's kingdom it is necessary to reduce oneself to the child's condition, to be stripped, at least spiritually and affectively, if not materially and effectively, of rank, power and property. Effective and material detachment is required in a high degree from those who have to spread the kingdom. They present themselves to the world to present Christ. They must rely on nothing but the presence of Christ to make an impression or to give them importance.[2] The urchin whom Christ used in his demonstration acquired a temporary importance from the presence of Christ, because Christ took him and used him. The importance of the apostle is that he is similarly an instrument of Christ. Any other importance he may have, or think himself to have, is an irrelevance and a distraction. He must strip himself down to the state of the child.

The same truth is taught in greater detail in St Matthew's gospel. His first great discourse gathers together Christ's teaching about the spirit which must animate the members of the kingdom. In the second great discourse he describes the spirit which must inspire those who are to spread the kingdom. Of course, it is wrong to see a clear dichotomy here, as though the kingdom had two castes, passive and active: those who merely belong to the kingdom and those who propagate it. 'You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world'.[3] These things were said in the first discourse: therefore the lessons of the second discourse must be assimilated by all of us. Otherwise our talent lies buried in a napkin, uninvested, without increase.

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[1] Mk 9, 37.

[2] This is the burden of St Paul's teaching on the apostolate. Cf e.g. 1 Cor 2 and 2 Cor 3–4.

[3] Mt 5, 13–14.

The condition of the apostle described in the discourse can be largely summed up in the word exposure. The apostle is not equipped to impress; he is barely equipped to survive. In a sense, he is as hopelessly dependent as a child, as defenceless as a sheep. The child in our first scene had nothing save what he stood up in, and that was from his parents. The apostle has nothing, 'no gold nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff'.[1] The child fares well or badly according as he finds himself among kind or unkind people. The apostle will be fed and housed or hungry and roofless in the same way. Against callousness and brutality he can no more defend himself than can the child, 'they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues . . .' The apostle has forfeited his adult status, except in the most important item. The most important quality of the adult is responsibility, and this has been given to the apostle as to no one else. He has, to an unequalled degree, the responsibilities of an adult without the privileges of the adult status.

The apostle needs his adult power of judgment. 'Be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves'.[2] Without financial resources and physical protection, discretion is his only strength. The comparison with the serpent is, of course, in no way odious. The hebrews had no use for ingenuousness, and a considerable respect for the man who could outwit others. Their ancestor Jacob was conspicuous in this respect, and so were many other national heroes. Christ's own dexterity when his opponents try to trap him with the dilemma of the tribute money or the woman caught in adultery is to some extent in this tradition.

But this nimbleness of judgment, this resourcefulness is to be used only to avoid persecution, not to gain advantage over anyone. The 'innocence' of the dove is plesantly expressed by T. H. White: 'She has learned throughout the centuries to specialise in escape. No pigeon has ever commited an act of aggression nor turned upon her persecutors; but no bird, likewise, is so skilful in eluding them'.[3] The novelist puts this comment into the mouth of Merlin's pet owl; but it is, I think, apposite enough to qualify for any commentary on our Lord's command.

It is this combination of complete unaggressiveness with a highly developed technique of survival that Christ prescribes. There will be ample opportunity for exercising it. The apostle is to go forth

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[1] Mt 10, 10. [2] Mt 10, 16. [3] *The Sword in the Stone* (London, 1938) Ch XVII.

peaceable as a sheep, pacific as a dove; but he will soon find himself in a jungle, a jungle which his presence will start into angry life. 'I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother . . .'[1] In the jungle of human passions the apostle must try to survive but without the offensive weapons of the jungle.

This is what Christ himself did. He was born when the jews were ruled by the ruthless, suspicious Herod, a real king of the jungle, who had climbed to the throne over the corpses of his enemies and then protected his position by the slaughter not only of his rivals and rebels, but with the death of his favourite wife and three of his sons. And while Herod sat, wary and restless on his throne, Christ was born and laid in the manger.

When Christ began to preach, the political situation was more complicated. The jews were now ruled directly from Rome. Roman rule was conscientious, but when challenged, merciless. There were native collaborators on the one hand and a fanatical resistance movement on the other. Between the two manoeuvred an unscrupulous clique of jewish leaders, avid for whatever power the romans could be persuaded or blackmailed into leaving them. And the peasant from the north began to preach about meekness and turning the other cheek and loving your enemies.

The defencelessness of Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament. Gideon reduced his thirty two thousand men to three hundred before tackling his enemies 'who lay along the valley like locusts'[2]. Samson went alone and in bonds to meet the philistines at Lehi where he slew a thousand of them. David would not wear armour when he went to meet the tank-like Goliath. All these heroes appear to court certain defeat. They deliberately avoid superiority or even parity of numbers or weapons. Yet they win. The New Testament takes the formula a stage further. The defencelessness of the hero no longer leads to a surprise victory; he dies. Or rather the surprise victory is now postponed until after his death.

Christ's kingdom is to be spread by the same bewildering strategy. The tactics of the kingdom replace coercive power with physical weakness, economic resources with poverty, prestige with inferiority of status. Gideon had to deprive himself of the mass of his followers to show that the victory was God's. In the New Testament thousands eat their fill from five loaves and two fishes. The insufficiency

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[1] Mt 10, 34–5. [2] Jg 7, 12.

of the instrument makes the divine power all the more obvious. 'When they deliver you up do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you'.[1]

Christ demonstrated the poverty of human resources of the apostle by pointing to a child. T. H. White suggests, in an amusing little story. that man became master of the world by renouncing the opportunity to acquire claws or wings and or an armour-like skin. In his tale, all the animals were originally created as homogeneous embryos. They were then offered the opportunity to change their limbs into specialised equipment for fighting, swimming, flying as they wished. Each species made its own selection for offence or defence, for speed or strength. But man elected to remain unchanged, unarmed and unarmoured, a perpetual embryo. The introduction of this fable may seem frivolous. But it is seriously relevant. Man as an animal seems ill-equipped to survive. Many other animals are bigger or swifter, or equipped with much more delicate senses or effective weapons. But although the world contains many stronger, fleeter, fiercer creatures it comes to be dominated by slow moving, clawless, scaleless man. And the world is to be mastered by the christian in weakness, in poverty and humility. These are the reverse of the qualities by which a kingdom is usually spread. Domination is commonly achieved by physical power, by greater economic resources and cultural superiority.

These means the christian apostle must repudiate. The gospel is something which is offered for acceptance and which is very much liable to be repudiated. 'If any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that town or house'.[2] It is true that the community that rejects Christ is threatened with a worse fate than Sodom, on the day of judgment. But it is not for us to anticipate the day of judgment with *auto da fe* or a revocation of the Edict of Nantes.

It is not for us to coerce, or even to strive to impress, with the things which make an impression in the world, that is, wealth or social and cultural status. To try and fortify the appeal of the gospel with snob value, or any kind of social, racial or cultural additive, is to cast doubt upon the intrinsic value of the gospel itself.

We readily, if sadly, admit that christians, and even the successors

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[1] Mt 10, 19. [2] Mt 10, 14.

of the apostles, have often betrayed the gospel by personal sin, by pride, avarice, love of power, by neglect of pastoral responsibility. We will admit ruefully that the government of the Church on earth has often been marred by nepotism, simony and over-willingness to propitiate secular powers. We have not yet, I think, faced the fact that Christ's commands concerning the means by which his Church is to be spread have been, and still are being, violated by us. History shows us far too often the sheep growing fangs to equal those of the wolves and employing them mercilessly. One often has the impression that the world has learned to hate religious persecution from the teachings of the humanist philosophers rather than from the Church; that if the fangs and teeth of persecution are now being laid aside, it is in answer to the pressure of a liberalism having its origin largely outside the Church, and that in some places the fangs are being very painfully drawn.

But if we are beginning to learn how utterly inappropriate it is to protect the gospel with physical power, we have still to assimilate the lesson that the spiritual splendour of the Church cannot be suitably or legitimately expressed with the intricate pomp and circumstance of secular monarchies. Curiously enough, secular power now finds these trappings largely unnecessary. The President of the United States and the ruler of the U.S.S.R. dress simply and deliberately try to appear plain and unpretentious. But the successor of the fisherman, the delegate of the carpenter, is still surrounded by the most elaborate pomp and circumstance in Europe, in spite of his personal efforts to free himself from it.

Read a clerical outfitter's catalogue and see what we have done with Christ's instructions. If a priest shows conspicuous zeal and effectiveness in his apostolic work, then his responsibilities will be increased. This increase of pastoral responsibility, this spiritual success, is commonly signalised by a carefully graded ostentation of style and dress which is worldly in inspiration. The Reverend Father becomes entitled according to his new rank to violet instead of black, to silk instead of cloth, perhaps to a *mozzetta*, a *zuchetto*, or *mantelletta*. For 'nor two tunics, nor sandals nor a staff', we appear to have substituted, 'Take your purple cassock, rochet, *cappa parva* and *fascia* with heavy tassels for canonical occasions, and your silk *feriola* and *fascia* with knotted fringe for receptions, in order to keep up the dignity of your calling'. To 'whatever town or village you enter . . .' we appear to have added 'and see that you are accorded the proper precedence'. 'If the house is worthy . . .' If the house is

worthy, recommend the householder for the appropriate grade of the five classes of the Chamberlains of the Cape and Sword'.

It is not merely that we have cluttered up the simplicity, the austerity and the urgency of the gospel mission with this elaborate worldly flummery. We are directly contravening Christ's instructions. We are trying to win the world from worldliness by worldly means. A member of a religious order is fortunate to be less exposed to the vanities of the lesser prelacies. But the pit of worldliness still yawns for him too. A religious who prides himself on the intellectual reputation of his order, on the fact that its members are popular with 'thinking' Catholics, or on the social status of his order's pupils has fallen into it. When we gloat over the conversion of some celebrated person, as though it were the Church that were being benefitted rather than the convert, we make the same mistake.

Am I maintaining that the apostle had better be ignorant and uncouth? Yes. Better be ignorant and uncouth than think that our intellectual or social sophistication adds some very valuable element to the gospel we preach. We are not denying that the humility with which the gospel must be preached demands that we adapt ourselves to those to whom we bring the gospel: provided that we do not begin to adapt the gospel itself. We must preach the gospel and offer it for its own sake alone, because it is of God, because it is true, not trying to impress men with the fact that great intelligences have accepted it, that it has inspired artists and poets, that some of the best families believe in it. Aquinas did not shed lustre on the faith; the faith illumined Aquinas. Dante and Fra Angelico did not enriched the gospel story; the gospel enriched them. The power of the gospel is such that it can save even members of the best families.

The apostle derives his confidence from his mission, from the fact that he comes from Christ with Christ's message.[1] He needs no other resources and should look for none. Yet again we enlist some alien power to give the Church strength. In the nineteenth century we leaned on conservative (reactionary, if you like) forces against the revolutionary movements: the sheep throwing in its lot with one of the wolves. And the sheep itself was mauled by the victorious younger wolves. The mistake seems to have been repeated in our own times in the iberian peninsula. Fear of the communist wolf has often made us shelter behind capitalism, and we have bleated with pleasure when we have been praised for our anti-communism.

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[1] Cf 1 Cor 2.

But the most pernicious mistake of all, the most pernicious because the most common and the least recognised, is to ally the Church with local nationalism, to try and present it as part of a national tradition. This is gravely tempting. It is tempting because nationalism, although it is a crude, irrational, vicarious form of self-assertion, still passes in the world for a virtue. When nationalism can gain religious approval and when the local church is supported by militant nationalism, both are considerably fortified. 'All for X-land; X-land for Christ', is a very effective slogan, as the X-landers know. They sometimes inscribe it on the crucifix, dishonouring the death of Christ, who rejected jewish nationalism, and died that we should be united, not divided. (My example is quite factual).

On both sides of the Atlantic this unholy alliance is practised. In Africa and Asia the native clergy, afraid of the accusation that they are hangers-on of the imperialists, are tempted to vie with the strident nationalism of their non-christian countrymen. But nationalism is a staff on which we must not prop ourselves, national costume a second tunic that we must not carry, national tradition a bag into which the gospel is not to be stuffed.

The gospel is not to be protected by alliances. The new born Christ had only the minimal protection of his swaddling clothers and the loving care of two peasants. He lived so unprotected that he died on the cross. 'It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher and the servant like his master'.[1] We must do without protectors. We must not curry favour with autocrats or democracies; we must not rely on the patronage of the great, nor try to ingratiate ourselves with the many.

We must not put forward the christian morality on the grounds that it will mitigate the social problem of teenage promiscuity, nor tender it as an effective aid to mental health because it integrates the individual with his universe. These are irrelevant 'gimmicks'. To use them is to sell the gospel with the help of social gift coupons or psychological trading stamps.

We offer the gospel. In brief, and this tells us everything, we must offer it as Christ offered it. The easy ways he had rejected in the desert. He would not launch his mission with the showy gimmick of a miraculous descent from the temple pinnacle. He would not compromise with the power of evil to get control of the kingdoms

[1] Mt 10, 25.

of the world painlessly. He presented himself as a penniless peasant from the despised north. He offered neither wealth nor power nor even peace. He dissociated himself from both the sadducees and the pharisees. He would not align himself with the nationalists, against the colonial power: 'Render to Caesar . . .', he said, but without being obsequious to those who held power. He refused to be a political messiah. All these things, any of these things, would adulterate his message. And he was prepared to see his message rejected. It was.

Most important of all, in offering his message Christ offered himself. He devoted his days and his energies to offering his teaching. This meant that he had no home, no comfort, no secure source of livelihood. The apostle must offer himself in the same way. His life is no longer his own. It is spent on his mission. His physical and mental energies are to be expended on those to whom he has been sent, not on himself. He therefore abandons stability, security and comfort. He will have to take what support, what hospitality comes to him.

And there is no knowing how far this offering of himself may have to go. Christ's offering of his days, his energies, and his home culminated in his trial and death. So the sheep that is being sent among the wolves should not try to insure himself against wolf bites: not even fatal ones.