

THE FULNESS OF TIME

By ROBERT J. O'CONNELL

FEW messages were written so darkly across the world Christ entered than the one which underscored the 'emptiness' of time. With only rare exceptions ancient man envisaged time as cyclic and endlessly repetitious: all that has happened, been said or done, will happen again, again be said and done – again and again and again. Even the stoics who bravely tried to find some meaning for man's temporal activity had to give in, in spite of themselves, to the sighing plaint of Eliot's lines:

Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.¹

But men of every age have experienced a similar temptation. Even after the common conception of time had become linear instead of cyclic, so that time could truly advance, march onward, issue in genuine progress toward some goal, the theme of emptiness recurs. Time is a desert, the life in time a weary journey through arid wastes that stretch monotonously 'before and after'. Tomorrows 'creep in their petty pace from day to day' and yesterdays 'have lighted fools the way to dusty death'. In that desert journey, peaks and valleys tend to level off: joys fade as their promise withers like the desert grass, while pains turn to dullness and dullness in turn to tedium. There is left only the deadening round of everyday chores, stretching inexhaustibly onward toward a vanishing horizon.

There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable . . .²

Some indeed have seen that nothing in time is ultimately 'reliable'; man must drink deep of each passing moment, 'warm [his] hands at the fire of life' and when it shrinks, be ready to depart. Others in

¹ Eliot, T. S., *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton* (London 1944), p. 13.

² *Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages*, ed. cit. p. 27.

a fit of impotent defiance have shaken their fist at time, endeavoured to raise some 'monument more enduring than bronze', be it poem or pyramid, to perpetuate at least their memory. Shelley's *Ozymandias* would have the mighty look on his works and despair, and the irony of it is he has had his wish. For time's inexorable march has trod him to dust, while around the relic of his colossal statue, now only 'vast and trunkless legs of stone, the lone and level sands stretch far away'. Such, it would seem, is the destiny awaiting all the products of time.

O dark, dark, dark. They all go into the dark,
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant . . .
And we all go with them, into the silent funeral . . .¹

But no desert is quite without mirages: another ancient doctrine equates our temporal existence with an exile; the soul in time has fallen from its rightful habitation in eternity, and death is a passage, not into the dark, but back to light. Our life was not always this way, the soul's immortal longings must betoken a nostalgia for what was, a blissful fulness once enjoyed 'up there', and beyond time. That paradise refound awaits the soul freed from its bodily prison, flown from time's unrest and the distraction of its nagging round of activities. The soul must therefore try to escape, break out of time, leave behind the life of action and cling in contemplation to the light that wells 'at the still point of the turning world'.

What all these solutions have in common is the conviction that time is 'empty'; the life in time is a pointless, meaningless round or sequence of preoccupations; to speak of a fulness of time would be a paradox too strange to hear.

'How odd of God to choose the jews' – a nomad people used to desert journeys – to suggest that this paradox was true. The desert of time could flower into oasis, the soul which could not break through and dwell in the blaze of eternal light would find eternity breaking through to time; the eternal Word which 'was' before the beginning, which temporal reality in its gliding flux was stammering to utter, could be made flesh, dwell amongst us, and thereby bring our empty times to fulness.

For in the fulness of time, God sent his Son.² When the hour had struck, when 'her time was accomplished', Mary brought forth a child. An infant like other infants, he was born 'under the law', not

¹ *Four Quartets*: East Coker, ed. cit. p. 18.

² Gal 4, 4.

only the mosaic law, but under the law of growth and history, of temporal constriction and temporal fulfilment. At a given place, a certain point in human history, the eternal entered our temporal world. In the fulness of time, time received the promised fulfilment. 'And of his fulness we have all received'.

For up to then fulfilment had been only promised, but promised to a people who had learned to lean forward constantly into time, peer ahead into the dimness of the future, bend to the task assigned them, search for the land foretold to them, wait for the day of which their prophets spoke, the 'day of visitation'. All around them nations dwelt which we might deem more cultured, more philosophical than the jews; beside their wrestling efforts to break off the wheel of change, the hebrew acquiescence in the temporal, the earthly, may seem primitive. For centuries they speak of eternity itself in terms drawn from time, conceive of man's task as confined to time where God has put him. From Adam forward man was made to 'till the soil' of the creation over which the Lord has given him dominion. In execution of that mandate he must find his happiness, or better perhaps, some measure of meaning for his life. Deadening the daily round could be: the hebrew was just as bothered as his neighbours by 'straight hair and sore toes and a dull grey sky in the morning', by all the prose of daily living. Yet toil, for him, beckons with a promise; enjoined by the God who had entered into alliance with his chosen, it must enclose some significant secret; when doubts occur to them, the israelites' answer is to redouble their efforts to hack out of this desert the bloom that was promised. And looking back into the past they see successive confirmations of that promise, the fruits of Jahweh's invasions into time and human history: Sinai and the exodus, a desert waste once crossed, a land attained, conquered, settled and brought to flower. God is faithful, his covenant is true, the temporal task he has assigned them here cannot be senseless. If there is infidelity, it must be theirs.

And yet, the promised is never the possessed, tomorrow never today. This leaning forward into time, eyes peering hopefully into the future for some validation of the present effort, has something too time-bound about it. It calls for a completion which will validate the 'now' and still preserve an uncompromising acceptance of time and toil and action, a resolute trust in God as God of history. It mutely clamours for time to be fulfilled.

But history takes time to reach fulfilment. Their kingdom rent

asunder, their nation taken off into exile, the israelites return with a vision of the future altered, purified, deepened. Typically, the keynote of this alteration is found in a new emphasis on God's own transcendence of time and creation. He is 'God everlasting, the creator of the ends of the earth',¹ 'God from old, and from now onward the same',² the 'first and the last'.³ His people are his 'witnesses', his 'servants', whom he has chosen so that the nations 'may know and believe me, and understand that I am he . . . I, I am the Lord'.⁴ All history is his because he is beyond all reach of time; all nations are to be called because he alone is the transcendent, the 'other', alone God. And yet, the terms themselves are all drawn from the lexicon of space and time; here, as in all human speech of God

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision . . .⁵

But this new accent is in line with a whole set of old questions which now recur with new insistence. If each man dies for his own sins, yet the innocent obviously perish while the unjust visibly prosper, what personal fulfilment of the alliance can await the faithful israelite? If God's own Servant is to suffer and die, what shall his heritage be? What is this 'land' of which Isaiah speaks – some land, perhaps, beyond the grave and not in time? For the splendour of that 'new earth and new heaven' has surely never been glimpsed by mortal eye; the 'day' of Yahweh's 'visitation' blazes with apocalyptic fire, and the Son of Man is clothed in glory no man ever wore . . . Messiah, Son of Man, suffering Servant, new earth and new heaven, these were

. . . only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.⁶

Praying, they still scan the future; acting, they rivet their eyes on time's horizon, waiting the dawn of a day like any other day and yet (however obscurely guessed at) the last of days, the *Eschaton*.

A day like any other day: in the fifteenth year of the reign of the

¹ Isai 40, 28.

² Isai 43, 13.

³ Isai 44, 6; cf 41, 4; 48, 12.

⁴ Isai 43, 10–11.

⁵ *Four Quartets: Burnt Norton*, ed. cit. p. 12.

⁶ *Four Quartets: The Dry Salvages*, ed. cit. p. 33.

Emperor Tiberius, when Herod was governor of Galilee and Lysanias was governor of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas; a day of human experience, fixed in time by the usual coordinates of history. And yet, the last of days, when the 'time had come' and the kingdom of God was finally 'at hand' – the 'fulness of time' when a man could stretch out his arm and touch the Eternal.

The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual.
Here the past and the future
Are conquered, and reconciled.¹

Now there is but one way to eternity, one door – and any who would enter by another are brigands and robbers. Philip would 'see the Father': hidden in his plea may be a hint of man's inveterate ambition to break out of time and body to a momentary glimpse of the eternal. If so, it is quickly corrected: 'He who sees Me, sees the Father'.² Here. Now. Time is no longer a desert to be fled, the desert itself has bloomed, the lump of temporality been leavened with eternity, 'God has visited His people'. The joint of eternity with time has once and for all been sealed, the *Eschaton* is 'here, now, always'. Henceforth 'only through time is time conquered'.

It would be hard to overstress the originality of this christian view of time – a time no longer 'empty' and illusory in contrast with the timeless; one from which a 'flight' is necessary to encounter the eternal – but a time transfused, transvalued by eternity's having 'come', become a leavening ingredient of human history. Even as late as the thirteenth century, the strains of articulating this new density of human life are unmistakable. When St Thomas treats in the third part of his *Summa* of the question dealing with the kind of life Christ should ideally have led, his choices are basically two: the active life of temporal involvement, and the theoretic life spent in contemplating the eternal truths. Philosophic and religious tradition since Plato had felt forced to opt for one or the other, and St Thomas has already made his option: the contemplative life is superior to the active. But was not Christ's the model human life? Why, then, was he not a contemplative?

To resolve his difficulty, St Thomas speaks of a third kind of life,

¹ *Ibid*

² Jn 14, 9.

blending action with contemplation. The suggestion had in fact been made by St Augustine, whose initial preference for contemplation had perhaps worn somewhat thin: a long career as 'pastor of souls' had made him more aware, one may think, of the peculiarities of the christian form of existence. But in his earlier handling of the action-contemplation question, St Thomas saw fit to reject Augustine's suggestion, or at least change its meaning: now, however, he accepts it happily.

With that acceptance, a whole new range of problems opens up, but at the same time a number of haunting difficulties promise to dissolve. Plato had started with a burning preoccupation with man's life in the 'city', with virtue in the active, political sense; all at once he discovers that his portrait of the philosopher risen to the contemplation of unchanging Good was so entrancing that the sage might have to be pulled forcibly down to immerse himself again in action, in the everyday temporal concerns of men. Aristotle comes to the closing questions of his *Ethics* asking what the practice of moral virtue contributes to man's attainment of contemplative beatitude; the answer seems to be, in essence, very little. The early Thomas follows Plotinus' teaching that the active moral virtues serve to prepare the soul for eventual access to the higher life of contemplation; but this leads man away from his fellows and their temporal concerns, the proper terrain of those very active virtues. Further, he admits, a man cannot enter heaven unless he has acted towards his fellows with that charity which, for the christian, is both the soul and bloom of the moral virtues – yet he can so enter without ever having mounted the contemplative heights . . .

But the New Testament suggests that even the apostles did not immediately grasp the new dimension which temporal existence had received through Christ's presence. The transfiguration finds them rapt as any visionary would be; the glory of the Word reduces them to dumb amazement, the world of action fades and nothing counts beside this moment out of time: 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; let us build three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elias'.¹ But Christ will not have it so. He has a mission to accomplish, a mission on which he would send them. The vision runs its course, the glory hides itself again, and they are left with 'Jesus only'. He leads them down from the mount to deal again with that sinful and adulterous generation from which

¹ Mt 17, 4.

this unforgettable interlude must have seemed so blessed a relief.

The same reaction grips them on Mount Olivet as a cloud envelops the ascending Christ and finally takes him from their sight. They stand there, rapt again, lost to the world in the nostalgic wonder of the moment. But then the angel chides them: 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand there looking up into the sky? This very Jesus who has been caught up from you into heaven will come in the way that you have seen him go up to heaven'.¹ And when he comes, he will require them to give account of the mission he had just conferred upon them, to 'be witnesses for me in Jerusalem and all over Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth'.²

Years later, just as John remembered the exact hour when the new found Messiah first took them aside and showed them where he dwelt, Peter will recall the moment they were 'eye-witnesses of his majesty' and heard 'those words borne from Heaven when we were with him on that sacred mountzain'.³

Yet, like John, he has meanwhile learned a lesson; the epistle in question comes from a 'slave and apostle of Jesus Christ' who has worn out his life in that mission of 'witnessing', 'announcing' the Word and feeding the Lord's sheep. The same chapter of his epistle has him urging his flock to 'faith with goodness', 'steadfastness with piety, piety with a spirit of brotherhood, and the spirit of brotherhood with love', qualities which, he promises, will leave them neither 'blind nor near-sighted', 'neither idle nor unproductive when it comes to the understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁴ The prescription is a crucial one; it differentiates christianity's accent from all others. What confers 'perfect peace through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord', opening the heart's eye to his 'divine power' operative in the apparent banalities of human history, is the very set of virtues which the greek would have called, not contemplative, but active, not intellectual, but moral. But those moral virtues now have been suffused with the typical christian note: the catalogue now lists goodness, piety, brotherhood, love. And the knowledge they bring forth is no speculative thing, result of an intellectualist break-through into a realm of eternal verities; they issue, rather, in an understanding of some-One, the Lord Jesus, and in a 'peace' that comes with having grasped through faith that his power operates continuously in the world of time.

So John also, eagle of the evangelists. His disciples may have

¹ Acts I, II.

² Acts I, 8.

³ 2 Pet I, 16-18.

⁴ 2 Pet I.

hankered after some deep mystical revelation, but the tradition has him favouring them instead with the tiring refrain, 'Little children, love one another'. There is an air of suppressed excitement as he writes of 'what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes and touched with our own hands, . . . that eternal life that was with the Father and has been revealed to us . . . that we announce to you also, so that you may share our fellowship, for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ'.¹ This is one who has 'seen'. But what tells us that we live in God's light rather than in darkness? How can we see, hear, touch that 'eternal life', share that 'fellowship', be 'sure that we know him'? John's answer is dictated by our Lord's: 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another as I have loved you'.² Hence his answer is as peremptory as Jesus' own: 'Whoever says, I am in the light and yet hates his brother, is still in darkness . . . and he does not know where he is going, for that darkness has blinded his eyes'.³

Again, the heart's eye is opened by love; for 'It is he who has my commands and observes them that really loves me',⁴ and 'Anyone who loves me will observe my teaching, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and dwell with him'.⁵ This intimate union of God and man is the fruit of that 'new commandment' of love; it is no longer question of quitting time and breaking into a timeless divine realm; the Divinity has condescended to be drawn into time, encountered in the fabric of human history – by those whose vision is sharpened by love.

'Lord', they protest, 'when did we see you hungry and gave you not to eat, thirsty and gave you not to drink, naked and did not clothe you . . .?' They had encountered Christ and like the disciples going to Emmaus, failed to recognize him in their plain, anonymous fellow-pilgrim. Yet what they did, they did unto him.

Struck from his horse, Paul had asked an analogous question, only to hear Christ reply, 'I am he who you are persecuting'. And so, when the Corinthians boast of their *gnosis*, that 'understanding' which marks off the inner circle of those who 'see' with secret knowledge not granted to 'pneumatic' souls immersed in daily concerns, Paul's answer is ready. He does not scorn such knowledge; he too has learnt something of the power of those moments 'out of time', those arcane revelations wherein the veil seems momentarily lifted. Such charismatic gifts are not to be spurned, but they must yield

¹ 1 Jn 1, 1-4.

² Jn 13, 35.

³ 1 Jn 1, 9-11.

⁴ Jn 14, 21.

⁵ Jn 14, 23.

to gifts more perfect. He will 'show them a better way' – the way of love. For 'if there is inspired preaching, it will pass away. If there is ecstatic speaking, it will cease. If there is knowledge, it will pass away'. Alone, 'love will never die out' and so they must 'pursue love, while [they] are cultivating the spiritual endowments', trying to 'excel in them in ways that will do good to the church'.¹ But that church, Christ's body, is founded on, ensouled by love, built up by the labour of mutual service whereby we 'bear one another's burdens'. This labour of love, he assures them, is never lost, for it is the 'Lord's work' and 'through the Lord your labour is not thrown away'.² Love is the central witness to the Christ whose love has saved us. His Spirit is, moreover, the Spirit of love poured forth into our hearts, prompting us to cry out, not in longing for some flight from time, but in wondering response to the Father's marvellous incursion into time through his Son's redemptive work; a work that still continues, now.

Yes, 'now': there can hardly be a more christian word. Drawn from the lexicon of time, it keeps attention riveted on history and God's historical design working out in the lives of men and nations. Here the value of the hebrew accent is preserved. And yet, the christian usage loads that term with a weight it had not even for the jew. The more typical hebrew attitude leans forward into the future, is one of effort, quest, expectancy. The 'now' has value, but a value constantly imperilled, liable to be more utilitarian than final: what I do now will prepare the better, brighter future for which I long. For the present tends to appear as obviously imperfect, unsatisfying, incomplete; it tends to become the arena of struggle and creativity in which the more complete and satisfying tomorrow is being wrought. But when tomorrow comes it will be a new now, a now as oriented toward the future as today, as incomplete and evanescent. God's hand can be discerned straightening the random lines of history, indeed; my labour is assigned me as his 'mission', and in some sense therefore is a constant dialogue with him, a dialogue which gives it present meaning. Despite all this, the present meaning of my 'now' is all too likely to be postponed, to be reduced and measured by its productivity for tomorrow: the desert must be crossed, the land be won and brought to flower.

But 'now is the day of salvation';³ for the christian, the kingdom of God is not far off, it is 'at hand', 'in our midst'. Not only is it

¹ 1 Cor 13, 1-13.

² 1 Cor 15, 58.

³ 2 Cor 6, 2.

true that the mission Christ gives me is given now, the labour he demands (whether eating or drinking or whatever else I do) is labour now, the grace and love he manifests to me are present grace and present love: but just as importantly, these features of my dialogue with him should brighten, fill, perfect my present moment. I meet him, not alone on judgement day, but now – or, rather, judgement then is merely my encounter now revealed for what it is, eternally becomes, in each moment of my time. He has come, but more than that, he comes and is forever coming – ‘here, now, always’. He is some-One I can always find enriching all my present, if I but focus on the present in its depth, a depth his presence gives it. If my action is in constant response to his calling, I shall ‘find him’ in all I do, in all that beckons to be done, and my action can never degenerate into activism. Unless I find him (however slender the experience of that ‘finding’ may seem) even my contemplation never flowers into the fond dialogue of prayer. My recollection need not be retirement or flight from action: it must be a re-awakening of this joyful attention, this loving receptivity to the presence of his love in all events and objects and persons as they fill my every moment’s present.

The christian present, then, is not merely promise, it is already foretaste. The flower of the christian life is a joy whose full-blown fruit is heaven. For the heart of the christian life is love, and, unlike faith and hope, ‘love will never die out’.¹ Yet even faith is vision inchoate, already dark discernment of God’s presence in the temporal present; and hope reaches out for fulness, but the fulness of communion which has already begun.

But time the builder is also time the destroyer. Day still follows day, childhood yields to adolescence and manhood to senility. Each day and age tosses some childhood toy on the dust-heap of the past, snatches some youthful joy and leaves us with a memory: the ‘pruning knife of time’ is always busy. But now its work is to shear away the overgrowth that might crowd out the sun of God’s persistent love; the ‘wounded surgeon plies the steel’ hour by hour to liberate, open our cramped hearts wider, make them more responsive to his love. Our dispossession deepens as this dialogue advances, hinting in the passing syllables of time at what heaven’s single Word will say forever. What transmutes this unrelenting diminution into growth, is love. For eternity does not

¹ 1 Cor 13, 8.

hover above and out of time, nor must it be envisaged merely as a 'happily ever after' at the extremity of a time-line running across the chasm of death. Eternal life begins now, as the inner depth, quite literally the heart of time, since the Eternal has entered time, told us his Name, and called us by our own. The christian life is constant commerce 'With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling'.

Which brings us once again to the paradox of christian time: the encounter with God's love revealed in Christ replies to our call and calls us in return, arrests us, and yet draws us forward. Time has been brought to fulness, yet day still follows day: the *Eschaton* is here, yet the procession of years and centuries moves onward; salvation is accomplished, yet each of us must each day work out our salvation.

The point, however, is that day follows day; within the fulness, each day gains from being bathed in eternity. The years and centuries have been set into a new key, each moment is transfigured by the loving dialogue of call and response which is the tone of the christian existence. Now more than ever, the present counts because charged with his presence and echoing with the 'voice of this Calling', his mission to each of us constantly renewed till his body shall have achieved its fulness. 'It is consummated', the wedding of humanity and God, the New Alliance has once for all time been compacted, just as in the life of each of us we once for all time die and rise in baptism. Yet the nations must each century be re-invited to the wedding feast, and we must each day die and rise with him, in ever-deepening renewal of that passage of baptism. Once and for all his sacrifice has reconciled humanity and the world of time to the eternal Father, yet each day's Mass draws us anew into that circle of love, in a 'memorial' which is also re-presencing. Once and for all he has 'descended into the lower regions' where the cords of temporal reality have become tangled, yet each day finds us collaborating with his never-ceasing labour of undoing the knots. Once and for all his incarnation has enacted the stupendous marriage between matter and divinity, yet each new generation must bend to the task of 'christifying' the universe through the Spirit sent forth from the side of Christ, making matter sacramental, vehicle of his power and revealer of his presence.

His presence: the presence, once again, of some-One, not some thing; a personal presence. Now he calls, now he answers my call, chides, encourages, draws or sends me as he wills. Abstractions,

deductions, general principles only go so far when dealing with this relation; like every personal affair it retains a core of the radically unpredictable. The light he sends may be a lamp only for my feet, only the next step may be clear, what lies ahead on my pathway may still lie in deepest darkness. Risk, adventure, the infinite possibilities of the unknown, such is the atmosphere of his mission. Attention, flexibility, the constant readiness to adapt and change at his beckoning, such must be the properties of my responsiveness. 'Come, follow Me'. His words to the apostles then were peremptory. There is no record of their having asked for guarantees, questioned him about his programme, asked him what he 'had in mind'. There were days when they went hungry with him, days when the dust of Galilee and Samaria must have choked them as they strode the roads under the eastern sun. One day we know of when he took them aside to rest after their trial mission, and the planned picnic was interrupted by a multitude of sick, confused and harassed sheep that were his flock and were to become theirs. Christian time is a poor respecter of office-hours.

Yet he had called them to be with him and that filled their lives. When he left them it was with a mission and a promise: a mission to be witnesses to him, to detect his need in all the need about them, his loneliness in every lonely face – to show his love still striding through a world forever moving 'In appetency, on its metallated ways/ Of time past and time future': they were to charge their every word and gesture with the depth and fulness born of his unfailing presence.

For that was his promise to them: 'Behold, I am with you all days, even to the end of time'. With him, their time could never again be empty; in him, they would bring his plenitude to all, filling the emptiness of time.