

YOUR DIVINE MAJESTY

By JOHN HARRIOTT

THE heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork'.¹ Signs and symbols throughout the universe tell of a being who is divine, just as a footprint in the sand discovered to Robinson Crusoe the presence on his island of another human being. A thunderstorm over mountains, the delicacy of a summer evening, the canopy of the stars, the innocence of a child: something of this sort, with its intimation of a transcendent beauty, holiness, power and intelligence, which alone seem able to explain their existence, will, at one time or another, effect even the least sensitive or imaginative of men. Useless though such experiences may be for a rational apologetic, for the average man, they are probably a stronger, more frequent, confirmation of God's existence than the Catholic, with his addiction to reason, sometimes cares to admit. But however strongly the believer's logic and emotional experience complement each other, however strongly they force on him the conviction that God exists, the divine being, whose indelible stamp on creation he recognises, remains elusive. No man 'has seen the Father except him who is from God; he has seen the Father'.¹ And the more convinced he is of God's existence, the more sensitive he is to the stirrings of divine power in creation and his own soul, the harder the believer finds it to bear with this denial. He wrestles impotently not with the problem of God's existence but with the problem of his nature. What kind of God is it that exists?

For the non-christian who regards man and nature as reflections of the divine nature, the evidence is conflicting: beauty and goodness are visible in each, but also cruelty and ugliness. For the christian the problem is partially resolved by the incarnation: he who has seen Christ has seen the Father, and that Father is a God of love and compassion. Yet however closely he reads and meditates upon the gospels, however convinced he is that in the Church, in the Word of God, in the liturgy, in the sacraments, in the communion of the body and blood of his Lord, he encounters God, to the average

¹ Ps 19, 1.

¹ Jn 6, 46.

christian that God remains a hidden God and, in some sense at least, impersonal. He is denied that final satisfaction of his curiosity, to see God in the flesh. He feels that he knows about God, but that he does not know God. This common experience is, of course, the consequence of a life of faith, a life of faith within which the effects of grace are real, sometimes recognisable, but often enough to be taken on faith and without savour. Our dissatisfaction can never be resolved short of the beatific vision, and meanwhile we remember that blessed are they who have not seen and have believed. Even in ordinary life, however, we can form a judgement of another man's character without meeting him face to face. I may not have seen Jones, but by reading letters from him, reading his autobiography, hearing his friends and acquaintances talk about him, listening to his voice on records, I can form a true, even if partial, estimate of his character and personality. In some such way I form my idea of God's personality, when once convinced of his existence and the existence of his revelation. He has left us statements about himself, he has acted in history, he has revealed himself in his incarnate Son, he speaks to us through conscience and through creation. Step by step we form a coherent, though tantalisingly incomplete, concept of God's personality; and the more we understand, the more the yearning of the psalmist, 'My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God',¹ sharpens into the touching prayer of St John at the end of the Apocalypse, 'Come, Lord Jesus'.²

A growing acquaintance with God's nature through our blessed Lord does not entirely dispose of a further problem: how to hold in balance the theologian's description of God and the philosopher's. The philosopher speaks of God as infinite, eternal, immense, simple, the ground of all being; the theologian of God as loving, just, merciful, wise, patient. It is not easy for us to think of a personality who is the ground of all being, or of an infinite, immense, eternal being who is a person of unlimited love, mercy and wisdom. The result in practice is that we tend to think either of God as a transcendent, incomprehensible, inaccessible abstraction, or of Christ as a loving, merciful and wise person, with only the scantiest acknowledgement that the one is the other. And yet if we fail to keep in conjunction these two aspects, the transcendent and the immanent, the abstract and the personal, the creative and the redemptive, we miss the point of the incarnation.

¹ Ps 42, 2.

² Apoc 22, 20.

Is there, then, some divine title by which the Church draws our attention to the distance and nearness of God, and reminds us simultaneously of our relationship as creatures to creator, and as redeemed men to our saviour?

There is one such title, applied to God with peculiar solemnity in the sacrifice of the mass, which seems to do exactly this. When at the offertory the wine is offered, the Church prays: 'We offer you the cup of salvation, Lord; and we ask of your loving-kindness that it may come before your divine majesty with an acceptable fragrance for our salvation and that of the whole world'. This title recurs in the common preface, 'Through him (Christ our Lord) the angels praise your majesty', and in the preface of the Blessed Trinity, where the Church speaks of the equality in majesty of the three distinct persons. Immediately after the consecration follow two prayers which employ the same title:

For that reason, Lord, in memory of the blessed passion of the same Christ, your Son, our Lord, of his resurrection from the place of the dead, and of his ascension into the glory of heaven, we your servants, together with your holy people, present your glorious majesty with this offering, taken from your own good gifts, the perfect victim, the holy victim, the unblemished victim, the holy Bread of eternal life, and the Chalice of eternal salvation.

We humbly beg of you, almighty God, have your holy angel bear these gifts in his hands to your altar on high, into the presence of your divine majesty; so that when, in the communion of this altar, we shall receive the infinitely holy body and blood of your Son, we may all be filled with every blessing and grace from heaven.

Both the title's significant position in the mass – it is used only in the canon – and its repetition attract attention. Further, it is used in such a way as to suggest that it is the highest and most complete title by which we can address God. It is God's majesty which his holy people gathered together are to praise; his majesty to which the sacrifice is offered; his majesty from which the benefits of that sacrifice are to be asked for and expected.

At first sight it might be supposed that the word majesty, like the word *clementissime* has been borrowed by the Church from the court of imperial Rome. It has all the political and literary overtones of kingship, and its usage by such spiritual writers as St Ignatius

Loyola and St Teresa of Avila is clearly and deeply affected by feudal notions of kings and courts. In modern times, when kings have become shadows on the world's stage and are shorn of real power and its ceremonial trappings, can such a word make more than a smudge upon the mind? In fact, it would be misleading to imagine that the liturgical use of majesty has its roots in political kingship. *Maiestas* was not employed as an imperial title until the sixth century, long after it had already acquired a rich meaning of its own among christians: it had, for example, a place in the mozarabic liturgy of the fourth century. The liturgical usage seems to have developed from the old latin translation of the greek Septuagint where it was used more frequently than by St Jerome, who preferred the word *gloria*, to translate *doxa*.¹ For instance, Isaiah 6, 3 in the old latin version read *plena est universaa terra maiestate ejus*; and this was almost certainly the version of the *Sanctus* prayer with which christians in Milan and Rome would have been familiar during the fourth century.

Peeping through the word majesty in the mass, then, is the greek word *doxa*, and the key to this word is the hebrew word *kabod*, whose several meanings the Septuagint uses *doxa* to translate. In the Old Testament, *kabod*, glory or majesty, indicated either God's essential character or the various ways in which he became present among men.² Its root meaning is weight, as we might say of a man that he carries weight in discussion; and a man has this kind of influence because of his character, his personality. *Kabod* could also be used of a man's possessions or a nation's prosperity, for to the hebrew mind prosperity was an outward sign of inward grace and divine favour. God's innermost nature is manifested both in his actions and in his appearances among his people through natural phenomena. His awesome power is brought out by the association of his presence with the thunderstorm and its elements of thunder and lightning, darkness and wind:

he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering around him,
his canopy thick clouds dark with water . . .
The Lord also thundered in the heavens . . .
he flashed forth lightnings.³

¹ Cf Botte et Mohrmann, *L'ordinaire de la messe* (Paris, 1953), p 111 et seq.

² Cf Ramsey, A. M., *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London, 1949), to whom the following pages are much indebted.

³ Ps 18, 10-14.

the God of glory thunders . . .
 the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
 The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl,
 and strips the forests bare.¹

This God, riding in the whirl-wind and directing the storm, is a power which brooks no challenge, and intervenes among men to guide events, to punish and console. But his glory is not always so impersonally revealed. When Moses asks to see God's glory he receives the reply:

. . . while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.²

Here God identifies his glory with himself – 'my glory' is 'I' – and while granting a rare and intimate vision of himself draws attention to the abyss which lies between holiness and man's unworthiness. This emphasis on God's holiness is a gradual development in the use of *kabod*, though it by no means entirely displaces the accent on his power. It is simply an additional reason for a man's subjecting himself to God. In Isaiah 6, 1–3, the prophet sees the Lord seated upon a throne, praised by the seraphim as the lord of hosts whose glory fills the earth, a being of superlative holiness untouched by anything base or impure; and the prophet's reaction in its presence is awe and wonderment. In face of it he feels guilty, unclean, inadequate.

Power can be hideous or beautiful, holiness can be attractive or simply provoke a sense of total unworthiness: 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'.³ God's power and beauty are attractive: his power is directed by wisdom and extreme delicacy, his holiness is magnetic. Time and again the word glory is used to intimate God's attractiveness, and as awe follows the vision of his power, so joy follows the vision of his beauty. That terrifying glory of the Lord which appeared 'like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel'⁴ will be, God reassures his people, a source of comfort to them: 'As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice'.⁵ There is the touching image

¹ Ps 29, 3, 9.

⁴ Exod 24, 17.

² Exod 33, 22–23.

⁵ Isai 66, 13.

³ Lk 5, 8.

in Deuteronomy of the Lord cherishing his people 'Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions'.¹ It is the Lord who fights Israel's battles and permits her defeats: 'Who is the King of Glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle'.² As if to emphasise that God's glory invites his people to draw near, not to retreat in confusion, the alarming images of thunderstorm, gloom and wind give way to images of light and splendour. To those who 'look for light, and behold darkness, and for brightness, but walk in gloom',³ the light and splendour of the Lord will be given:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.⁴

God will not hug the light and splendour of his nature to himself, but with it irradiate the whole of creation: 'Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low . . . And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together'.⁵ When God glorifies or sanctifies himself, he makes a sporadic and partial revelation of his power and holiness which in the time to come will be totally laid bare.

The tension between the two images of God's glory, the fearful magnificence of the thunderstorm and the radiance of light, which point to God's innermost nature, is also clear in the use of *kabod* for God's presence among his people. He is a God at once far off and near at hand. Among the post-exilic writers, the chief manifestation of God's glory is in the tabernacle. That same fiery brightness which had appeared to Moses on Sinai, so transfiguring his face that he had to veil himself before going down to the people,⁶ that same brightness 'the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord',⁷ which Ezekiel had seen in a vision, now settled in the temple as a sign of God's abiding presence. When the ark was taken into Solomon's temple '... a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests

¹ Deut 32, 11.

² Ps 24, 8.

³ Isai 59, 9.

⁴ Isai 60, 1-3.

⁵ Isai 40, 4-5.

⁶ Cf Exod 34, 35.

⁷ Cf Ezek 1, 28.

could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord'.¹ 'The high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy'² became the focus of a community dedicated to worship, whose chief activity was sacrifice, whose longing was for closer and closer intimacy with the divine being in their midst. Even then, however, excessive familiarity was restrained by a sense of awe and guilt in the presence of perfect purity and power, and this may to some extent explain the rise of the aramaic word *shekinah* in rabbinic literature, a circumlocution which was 'A way of speaking about God such as conveys the truth of his omnipresence, accessibility and special activity within the created world without infringing the doctrine of the transcendence'.³ It was used of God's dwelling in the holy of holies, the law and the good man, and later taken up by St John and St Paul to describe God's dwelling among his people through the incarnation, and the Holy Spirit's dwelling in the temple of the soul.

Two further uses of the word glory deserve mention. After the notion of God's kingship had been precisely formulated during the period of the monarchy, glory is used of his kingly nature, of the Messiah to come, and of the kingdom – whether the messianic kingdom or the renewal of the whole of creation – to whose establishment Israel looks forward.⁴ When the king of glory takes possession of his kingdom the just will adore the glory of the Most High, and God 'carried in glory as on a royal throne lead Israel with joy in the light of his glory'.⁵ The kingdom is pictured as God's people, the heaven and earth, the whole of creation, flooded with the radiance of God's glory.

Finally, God's glory demands a response from creation. Time and again in the Old Testament the people are bidden to glorify God, or creation is said to glorify him. In rational creatures, to give glory is to give intelligent assent to God's overlordship, to acclaim his power, holiness and beauty, to be on the look-out for it, to recognise it in his actions and in his creatures.⁶ So Achan gives glory to God by acknowledging that God has used his power mightily and justly against the israelites because of Achan's own theft.⁷ And irrational creatures, the mountains, deserts, the moon and the stars, the beasts

¹ 1 Kg 8, 10–11.

² Isai 57, 15.

³ Ramsey: *op. cit.* p 19.

⁴ Cf Schnackenburg, R., *God's Rule and Kingdom* (London, 1964).

⁵ Bar 5, 6; 5, 9.

⁶ Alszegehy, Z., Flick, M., 'Gloria Dei' *Gregorianum* Vol 36, 1955, pp 361–390.

⁷ Jos 7, 19.

of the field, share in and reflect back God's glory simply by being what they are. By glorifying God's objective glory according to their nature, all creatures will, in the kingdom to come, be suffused with the radiance of his glory which will be 'over all the earth'.

The story of majesty does not end there, however. The Septuagint translators by their use of *doxa* for *kabod* created a word of the utmost theological importance. They used it not only to translate the different meanings of *kabod*, the character, power, holiness of God, and the radiance of his presence, but also to translate kindred hebrew words meaning majesty, beauty, splendour and the like, as well as the aramaic word *shekinah*. All these meanings run together in one grand conception of the divine glory present among men and supremely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ who 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature'.¹ In him God dwells among men far more intimately than in the tabernacle or the Law, in him the splendour of the divine nature is made visible. It is the divine glory which shines in Christ at the transfiguration, it is the radiant state into which he is raised up at the resurrection and ascension, it is the glory into which christians can hope to enter at his second coming. Our share in Christ's glory at the Parousia is a recurring theme in the epistles of Peter and Paul: 'When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory',² and 'Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed'.³ Indeed, though Christ's glory is not yet perfectly revealed, the labours of his redemptive life have been a constant revelation of his glory, a perpetual showing forth of the power, holiness and beauty of God. And we, though not yet perfect sharers in his glory, have our part in it even in this earthly life, being filled with the Holy Spirit, operating with the power of God, loving with his love, and being purified by faith and suffering so that we are ever closer images of his nature: 'We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another'.⁴ 'If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you'.⁵

These considerations are not irrelevant to the sacrifice of the mass. The mass is the meeting-point of the Divine Majesty with his holy people, called by his name and created for his glory.⁶ In the mass,

¹ Heb 1, 3.

² Col 3, 4.

³ 1 Pet 4, 13.

⁴ 2 Cor 3, 18.

⁵ 1 Pet 4, 14.

⁶ Cf Isai 43, 7.

heaven opens upon earth and earth is lifted up to heaven. A prayer before the consecration in the ethiopian missal beautifully expresses God's revelation of himself in the mass: 'May there be opened the doors of light, May there be opened the doors of glory, May the veil be lifted from the face of the Father, May the Lamb of God descend, may it be placed upon the priestly table before me, a sinful servant . . .'¹ The mass is a memorial and a revelation of the Lord's majesty, of his power, of his holiness, of his inaccessible light, of the wonderful works he has wrought for the salvation of his people. It is consciousness of his power and goodness which draws us together, united with the choirs of angels and hosts of the blessed, to offer sacrifice, in the presence of his Majesty. We stand together as ineffectual creatures in the face of limitless power, of him who is 'the giver of breath and bread; World's strand, sway of the sea; Lord of the living and dead'. It is a power which, unlike even the most exalted human power, suffers no constraint from native disabilities or the inadequacy of subordinates, a power directed by perfect knowledge and unerring judgement, a power which is the servant neither of space nor of time. We stand together as guilty creatures in the face of unutterable holiness, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, whose absolute goodness we can only darkly imagine by thinking away the divisions, tensions and evil inclinations that we experience in ourselves. In God there is nothing anxious, nothing confused, nothing disordered. Finally, we stand together in the presence of radiant light: 'God is light, and in him there is no darkness'.² The word is a metaphor but it is a metaphor which goes straight to the heart. The light of the sun, without which the world has neither shape nor colour, and whose absence brings to a halt all human activity: the light of the hearth welcoming the traveller out of cold and darkness: the light of the eye telling of serenity and grace: all these are familiar images which move us deeply. Light attracts, light cheers, light warms, and God is the source of light, light in himself, and the light under the world's splendour and wonder. As the Christmas preface has it, the light of the Father's glory has flooded the eyes of our mind anew in the mystery of the Word made flesh.

As offenders against this Majesty who 'do it wrong, being so majestical, to show it violence', we assemble at mass for the true work of our nature, the glorification of God. The mass repeats in

¹ Gassner, J., *The Canon of the Mass* (London, 1949), p 313.

² 1 Jn 1, 5.

mystery the cyclic movement of Christ's redemptive work in history. And Christ's work was to glorify the Father's glory, and to be rewarded both with the glorification of his own human nature as head of the human race and our glorification as members of his body. We have already seen that to glorify God is to acknowledge his overlordship, to be obedient to the demands he makes upon us, to seek the proclamation and manifestation of his nature in the world around us, to praise him for what he is; and the minute-to-minute loving obedience of Christ's sacrificial life is a work of glorification in this sense. He frequently repeats that this mission is the glory of the Father:

Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say, Father save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify thy name.¹

And he prays to be glorified in his turn:

I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do; and now, Father glorify me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made.²

He alone can offer perfect worship to God's majesty, perfectly acknowledge that majesty and respond to it, perfectly offer himself and the whole human race in sacrifice to that majesty, and perfectly atone for man's frailty and rebellion. And we, caught up into his mystical body by our baptism, are enabled to offer with him this perfect sacrifice, this perfect worship, this perfect act of obedience and reverence, so mysteriously repeated in the mass, and to share the glory with which the Father has glorified him through the acceptance of his atoning sacrifice.

That the mass is a work of glorification of God's majesty, through which we are glorified imperfectly in this life and perfectly in the world to come, is strikingly brought out in the new Constitution on the Liturgy. In Christ 'the fullness of divine worship is given to us'.³ The wonderful works of the Old Testament are said to be a prelude to Christ's work in 'redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God' – a task which he achieved principally by 'the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension'.⁴ Into this paschal mystery men are plunged by baptism

¹ Jn 12, 27–28.

³ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 5.

² Jn 17, 4–5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

and receive the spirit of adoption as sons 'in which we cry: Abba, Father'. Thus we become 'true adorers whom the Father seeks'.¹ Since Pentecost, the Constitution continues, 'the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the paschal mystery . . . celebrating the eucharist in which the victory and triumph of his death are again made present and at the same time giving thanks to God for his unspeakable gift in Christ Jesus, in praise of his glory, through the power of the Holy Spirit'.²

Every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of his body which is the Church, is declared to be an action surpassing all others'.³ And

In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem towards which we journey as pilgrims, . . . we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory . . . we eagerly await our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, until he, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with him in glory.⁴

Our works of charity and piety are 'to be the light of the world and to glorify the Father before all men'. And from the liturgy, 'which is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed',⁵ and especially from the eucharist, 'the sanctification of men and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as towards their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way'.⁶

The focus of the mass is, then, the Divine Majesty: God, eternal, immutable, infinite, 'ground of being, and granite of it', before whom we bow in awe and, like Moses, veil our faces; and yet a personal God, lovingly revealing himself in his incarnate Son who now 'enters into heaven itself, to appear in the presence of God on our behalf . . . to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself'.⁷ It is the Divine Majesty who accepts this 'holy, perfect and immaculate sacrifice and fills us with every heavenly grace and blessing'. In the mass we are taken up into his presence, touched with his power, purified by his holiness, lightened with the light of his glory, so that his glory may fill the earth and every created thing declare 'To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever'.⁸

¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

² *Ibid.*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷ Heb 9, 24-26.

⁸ Apoc 5, 13.