I BADE THEE GROW[1]

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THE history of our salvation is a history that repeats itself. The 'behaviour-patterns' of God recur – the pattern of 'call-and-response', for example, repeated in the call of Abraham and his response of obedience; in the call of Mary and her 'Behold the handmaid'; in the 'Follow me' of the gospels and the immediate abandoning of fishing-net and customs-table; in the call-and-response which is at the heart of every sacrament and at the source of every christian life. It is not surprising then to find a certain constancy also in the larger pattern of man's growth in the knowledge and the life of God. Yahweh's education of his people in the knowledge of and communion with him develops according to a certain pattern; this pattern is reproduced in Christ's formation of his apostles; we find it once again, at a psychological level, in the normal religious development of a child to maturity; and at an ontological and theological level in the history of every soul. The purpose of this article is to contemplate this pattern in all the contexts I have just outlined. For the sake of clarity only two will first be traced, the first and the third; but when we have seen how the laws of Israel's growth correspond to the laws of our own religious development we shall perceive the same pattern in other fields.

The origin and accomplishment of Israel's vocation are both to be found in the call of God to Abraham: 'Leave thy country behind thee, thy kinsfolk and thy father's home, and come into the land which I shall show thee . . . In thee all the races of the earth shall find a blessing'.[2] In a sense everything is here from the beginning; the whole of Israel's history will be but a living of this vocation and directed towards the ultimate realisation of this promise. Even so all the fulness of the christian life is present from the beginning, in the vocation and the accomplishment which is contained in the sacrament of baptism; but the riches of divine adoption have to be developed and made explicit in a gradual process of psychological and spiritual maturation.

The first great stage in the spiritual maturation of Israel was

[1] Ezek 16, 7.

[2] Gen 12, 1–3.

achieved through the event of the exodus and the experience of the desert. The intervention of Yahweh in saving his people from Egypt appears to Israel above all as an act of power and of love. As a manifestation of power it is celebrated in the canticle of Moses: 'A psalm for the Lord, so great he is and so glorious, horse and rider hurled into the sea . . . What power is there, Lord, that can match thee?'[1] Deuteronomy speaks of it above all as a manifestation of love: 'If the Lord has held you closely to him and showed you special favours, it was not because you overshadowed all other peoples in greatness: of all nations you are the smallest. No, it was because the Lord loved you . . . that he delivered you by force'.[2] So Israel in infancy knew the power of the All-loving and the love of the All-mighty, mediated to her through the outward event of the exodus. This experience of power and love, anchored deep in her heart, was to be the ever-present source of her knowledge of Yahweh, actualised for every generation by its celebration in the paschal feast. She would have much to learn of the nature of this power and the unwavering fidelity of this love: but in this identification of power and love was a revelation of God which subsequent experience might deepen, but which it would never make void. Of this power and this love Moses, the father of his people, was the mediator. As part of this same experience he mediated, too, the demands of God upon his people, as they learned in the desert encounter of Sinai his will in their regard, and received through the intermediary of Moses the law which they were to obey. The power which lay behind this law they saw reflected in the natural phenomena to which they were now exposed – in thunder and lightning, desert storm and drought, fierce sun, night sky and stars; and the love they saw in the manifest protection which kept them alive in the wilderness with bread from heaven and water from the rock. Everything combined to keep them conscious of Yahweh's presence, so that later they were to look back upon these desert days with a kind of nostalgia for the closeness of their encounter with him. 'What memories I have of thee, gracious memories of thy youth, of the love that plighted troth between us, when I led thee through the desert, alone in the barren wilderness, thou and I'.[3]

All this we see reflected in the religious experience of a small child. He too comes to his first idea of God through the experience of tenderness and security which envelops him in the family circle. Experiment has shown that this combination of tenderness and

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[1] Exod 15, 1–2. [2] Deut 7, 7–8. [3] Jer 2, 2.

security is necessary even for his full physical development. How much more important is it to his spiritual unfolding; for this experience of strength which is loving, and love which is also protection, mediates to him in the normal way of things his first concepts of the power and love of God. True it is that his identification of this with his mother and father will have to be transcended in some way that he may develop a sense of God; but at the same time this identification is a true mediation, and the religious concept to which it leads will never be transcended. The idea of God as at once the All-loving and the All-mighty must always remain deeply rooted in our religious consciousness, and actualised for each one of us whenever we say: 'Our Father . . .' Then, at the age of three or four, contact with the creation of God comes to enrich the child's religious ideas; we see developing a capacity for wonder and awe, touched to life by colour or shape, hill or sea or starry sky, or by the miracle of life revealed in small animals. So a sense of the sacred is awakened in the child – not in itself a religious experience, but the psychological foundation for worship. Even so the children of God in the wilderness were touched to wonder and worship by the desert storm. Then a first sense of the demands of God upon him comes to the child through the will of his parents; and God's providence is mediated through their care for him and their provision for his needs. And finally, if this spiritual maturation is accompanied by a wise religious education and he is led to pray, then for him, as for the children of Israel in the desert, God is very near.

If the experience of exodus and the desert can thus be described as the spiritual infancy and early childhood of Israel, so the period of the monarchy can be compared to middle childhood. We know how, between the ages of eight and eleven, children enjoy a time of relative stability in their psychological development. They seem to profit from this to structure their universe; their sense of history and geography develops, and they are able to place themselves, as it were, in the context of the world in which they live. Society takes shape around them, with its opportunities and its exigencies; norms of behaviour are adopted, and habits of living are formed. Their religious development normally harmonises with this. They structure their religious world: a study of the history of salvation and of the catholic activity of the Church gives to their religious experience a historical and a geographical dimension. They are concerned less with prayer than with behaviour; the external expression of worship in ritual is more important to them than contemplation. They love

forms and ceremonies. They are intensely moral in a rather legalistic way. They readily conform to set patterns of behaviour; and this is the ideal moment for developing habits of christian living. All this is reflected in Israel under the monarchy. A period of political and military stability corresponds with a period of religious tranquility, as the military supremacy of Israel in Canaan lessens for a time the attraction of pagan cults. Their religion, which had until now consisted more of a few fiercely-held insights and convictions than of a structured way of living, is now systematised and ordered. The temple is built and the cult strictly regulated in dignity and splendour. Laws, both human and divine, are codified, as a newly-formed bureaucracy places the kingdom on a basis of literacy. In one sense the reigns of David and Solomon represent a high peak of achievement in Israel's development. An ideal of peaceful and ordered living has been achieved, which the turmoil of later generations would look wistfully back upon, even as we, facing the disturbing image of our unco-ordinated adolescent, wonder what has become of the disciplined and biddable boy whom we knew some years before. But the equilibrium of Solomon's kingdom was not the equilibrium of maturity. Based on human wisdom and material prosperity, it had as yet little understanding of the kingdom of God, who chooses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise, and whose kingdom is the possession of the poor in spirit. This, Israel has to learn in a re-discovery of her own self through the bitter experience of her own weakness, and a re-discovery of Yahweh in a new and wholly unexpected manifestation of his power and love. So too the equilibrium of middle childhood, necessary though it is to a stable religious development, is yet a temporary equilibrium based on immaturity and ignorance of self. This stage must after a while give way to a period of insecurity and stress, ordained eventually to a greater maturity in a new knowledge of self and a new awareness of the mystery of God.

So, after a period of transition, comes to Israel and to the youngster whose religious development we have been following, the ordeal and the opportunity of adolescence. The adolescence of Israel is the exile. Its first shock is a shock of insecurity; everything which structured the life of Israel is taken from her at a blow: land, monarchy, temple – all are gone. The adolescent for his part is not snatched violently from home, but the structures of his life are attacked from within. Urges and impulses that he does not recognise take possession of him; he is out of harmony with his environment

and a stranger to himself. A sense of insecurity is a basic – perhaps the basic – feature of adolescent experience, and carries over most certainly into his religious experience too. Truths which he had previously found so easy to accept challenge and tease his intellect; laws which he had found relatively easy to obey now reveal to him his own unsuspected weakness. For the israelites the experience of the exile, however, though its first and most obvious aspect was disaster, was finally a great spiritual enrichment. Deprived of the temple and the external panoply of its cult, Israel re-discovered a more interior religion in the presence of Yahweh realised wherever his people met to pray: 'A sanctuary in little you will find in my companionship'.[1] For some time the prophets had warned Israel against formalism in worship. Now in exile she re-discovers the values of social justice and mutual charity.[2] Religion becomes more personal in the discovery and assertion of the individual's responsibility for his actions before God.[3] Hope in the promises of Yahweh grows strangely brighter as circumstances seem to make their realisation more impossible than ever; and the gaze of Israel is no longer turned backwards to an earthly glory which is no longer hers, but forward to the new covenant which the mercy of her God will establish in spite of her frailty and her many infidelities. And these hopes transcend the limits of nationalism. Again and again the prophets proclaim that the salvation which Yahweh will achieve is for all men.

Much of this is paralleled in the religious psychology of the adolescent. He too awakens to a discovery of persons – of himself as a person in relation to others as persons – and his religion becomes once more a personal relationship. In his natural reaction against formalism he seeks a religion of the heart. Morality is no longer for him a mere observance of precepts, but he perceives the inner law of charity. His sense of personal responsibility is strong. His sympathies are universal. His experience of his own weakness leads to a new discovery of the meaning of salvation. His very difficulties purify his faith and his hope, and teach him to rely on the promises of God.

But maturity is not achieved in a day. The centuries that were to elapse between the return from exile and the coming of Christ were Israel's final growth to maturity. Externally their history is confused and undirected, a see-saw pattern of conquests endured and rebellions attempted. Spiritually there is a clear line of progress,

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[1] Ezek 11, 16. [2] Cf Isai 58. [3] Cf Ezek 16; 23.

at least among the 'few' who retain the original vision of Yahweh as the God of tender love and of power. These are the 'faithful remant', who gradually come to be identified with the *anawim*, the poor of Yahweh. This identification has great significance in the theme we are pursuing: the *anawim* are those who place all their hopes, not in any power or excellence of their own, but in the power and the love of Yahweh. Youth has its own visions, dreams its own dreams, builds its own plans of sanctity around the perfectibility of self. Much of the conflict of adolescence comes of the tension between the ideal of a self perfected and the experience of one's own weakness and inadequacy. The danger is that of constructing and clinging to a pseudo-religious world in which self, not God, is the centre – the ultimate idolatry. Maturity is achieved when self, the world and God are seen and accepted as they really are. The abandoning of youth's illusions is not a disillusionment, but a liberation. Freed from the false exigencies of a spiritual self-reliance, a man is ready for that final acceptance of God as he has revealed himself which is at once the aim and the evidence of spiritual maturity.

It is for this final acceptance of God that Israel has been educated. To accept God in his final revelation to mankind will demand the objectivity of maturity – the abandoning of youth's illusions to adhere to the reality of a kingdom accomplished in meekness and humiliation. The rejection of Christ by his contemporaries shows that not all Israel had reached religious maturity. It might even suggest that the whole people had failed, were it not for one in whom the divine education is complete. Israel is mature in the person of Mary. Her 'Be it done to me . . .' is the affirmative of maturity; in her person the destiny of her race is achieved. This is a maturity too which discards nothing of the life-experience of the people of God, but contains it all. The revelation of power and love which came to Israel in the experience of the exodus and the desert is the context of Mary's acceptance: 'The Holy Spirit [of love] will come upon thee, and the power of the Most High will overshadow thee'. The bright promise of the kingdom is present too: 'the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father'. The deeper wisdom of the exile years, with their dawning realisation of a redemption achieved not in power but in weakness and humiliation, brought to the poor of Yahweh by one whose title is that of Servant – this is in Mary's heart, and finds swift expression in the spontaneity of her 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord'. So she gathers up in her person all the wisdom of her people, which the Lord God had 'bade grow' for this

very moment according to his word. In her person Israel is at last mature enough to utter the final 'Yes'; the long wooing is accomplished, and the Spouse can come to his own.

Our theme so far has been that of a certain parallel between the religious maturation of Israel and that of the individual. What of the new people of God in Christ? As we study the relationship between Christ and his apostles, it is a question no longer of psychological development, but of an education in faith, hope and charity. But the pattern remains constant. First Christ calls his apostles to live with him, and in this simple and direct contact with his person they learn to recognise power and love: power in the authority which he displays over sickness, over demons, over sin; love in the movement of his heart to the allaying of human misery, and in the compassion which seeks out the sinner and the poor. Here the power of the All-loving and the love of the All-mighty are truly among men, expressed in words that fall from human lips and in the gestures of human hands. This early knowledge of Christ through daily contact was fundamental in the christian experience of the apostles; to such an extent that when after Judas' defection they appoint another to take his place, it must be one who has known this simple contact, one chosen among the 'men who have walked in our company all through the time when the Lord Jesus came and went among us'.[1] Little by little he structures this experience for them. The characteristics of the kingdom are revealed through the miracles and the parables: the demands of the kingdom through the teachings summarised by St Matthew in the sermon on the mount as a programme of christian living. True, there was much that was new in the picture of the kingdom which emerged, but this would not have been too obvious in the exhilaration of those first months in Galilee, when Christ was not too unlike the picture of the Messiah which was in their minds, and might reasonably be expected to conform even more after a while to their preconceived idea. But as time went on Christ began to present the kingdom to them in a new perspective. It was no longer a question of a certain way of living, of accepting certain moral exigencies, but of accepting his Person in a new and mysterious relationship. He is himself the kingdom: 'I am the way, the truth and the life . . . I am the light of the world . . . I am the bread of life . . . I am the resurrection and the life'. And with this comes strange talk of a way of the cross, strange

[1] Acts 1, 6.

prophecies of humiliation and death. The secure world in which they had walked in his company is suddenly threatened: 'they were bewildered', says St Mark, 'and followed him with faint hearts'. Then the passion: total insecurity, utter bewilderment, turmoil of mind ('we had hoped that it was he who was to deliver Israel') and emptiness of heart ('they have taken away my Lord . . .'). The spiritual adolescence of the apostles leads through to the days after the resurrection. They have found a new personal relationship with their master ('My Lord and my God') but there are still hesitancies and misunderstandings ('Lord, dost thou mean to restore the dominion to Israel here and now?'). Maturity is theirs only with the coming of the holy Spirit. To this maturity all the experiences of their life with Christ contribute; St Peter on Pentecost day recalls the miracles of Christ, his death, his resurrection. But only now, in the gift of the Spirit, is that experience fused into one great act of acceptance of Christ in his cosmic role of Saviour: 'God has made him master and Christ, this Jesus whom you have crucified'. Under the influence of the Spirit the apostles who, during his lifetime, had been such recalcitrant pupils of their master, now preach in his name, work his works of healing, pray the prayer he taught them, imitate him in the breaking of bread, live in the fraternal love which was his precept, and rejoice to suffer in his name. Full commitment has been made possible to them in the maturity of the Spirit; only now is the initial call of 'Follow me' fully and maturely answered.

Can we fail to see the same pattern in the history of every soul – not now as successive phases in a psychological evolution, but as different manifestations of the working of the Spirit according to the inner law of our baptism? Simply to live in the presence of God, confiding one's weakness to his power and one's misery to his love – this is basic: as basic as was the infancy experience of security and tenderness, or Israel's knowledge of Yahweh in the power and love of the exodus event. There must also be the effort of asceticism, the endeavour to structure one's life according to given norms of behaviour, to correct defects of character, to avoid evil and do good. But this endeavour can be as deceptive and as stultifying as was, from one point of view, the experience of ordered prosperity in the kingdom of David and Solomon. Lest we go astray in the essential, we need too the searing experience of our own weakness, our own failure, the moments of insecurity and doubt, through which we learn that religion is not a question of norms of behaviour but essen-

tially of personal relationships. Maturity – and the path to it is a long one – will only come with the objectivity which will accept ourselves as we are and our salvation as the pure gift of God's grace.

What then is spiritual growth? For Israel there was nothing in the moment of Mary's acceptance which was not already implicit in the word of God to Abraham and Abraham's response. For us too, our end is in our beginning; the response of our maturity to the word of God is nothing other than the fulness of our baptismal response, the grace of spiritual maturity nothing other than the full flowering of the grace of sonship. But there is a maturation. The initiative in the process of Israel's maturation was always with Yahweh: 'I bade thee grow . . . I anointed thee . . . I clad thee . . . I made thee fair'.[1] Israel's part – the part of the faithful remnant – was to re-utter at every step the 'I am here at thy command' of Abraham. Through her many infidelities, a certain fidelity of the heart kept Israel within the plan of God, until the final echo of that fidelity in the faithful heart of Mary. So with us. It is not we who fashion our spiritual lives, but the Spirit within us; the initiative is with the grace of God. Our part is fidelity – not a fidelity of behaviour (for of that we are again and again incapable) but a fidelity of the heart. And because the Spirit who leads us leads us in power but above all in love, the end of his action will be to bring us – it may be only at the moment of our death – to that full act of self-surrender in love which is spiritual maturity. As for Israel, so for us. Ours it is simply to trust that He who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion.

> Listen to me, sons of Jacob, and all the rest of Israel's race, you whose weight has ever been my burden, like an unborn child, a babe in the womb. You grow old, but I am still the same; the grey hairs come, but I ever uphold you; I must carry you, I that created you, I must bear you away to safety . . . I am God and there is no other . . . I that spoke will make my word good; I that purposed it, my purpose will accomplish.[2]

[1] Ezek 16.

[2] Isai 46, 3–12.