

THE PATIENCE OF CHRIST

By JAMES WALSH

IT is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles that when St Paul was brought before the chief priests and the council to be examined about his teaching, and opened his defence with the words 'Brethren, I have lived before God and in all good conscience up to this day',¹ the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Paul replied: 'God shall strike you, you white-washed wall'.² Though there is every excuse for Paul's outburst of anger: 'Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?',³ it is still instructive to compare Paul's attitude and temper with our Lord's own, as he stood, bound, before the same high priest on the night before he suffered. When Ananias questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching, our Lord replied that he had always spoken openly and that there were many who could report what he had said. It was then that one of the attendants struck him in the face. But the Lord's only reply was: 'If I have spoken wrongly bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly why do you strike me?'⁴

Jesus had said to his disciples, as he instructed them on the mountain, in that didactic idiom which achieves its effect by ignoring the qualifications which depend on time or place or circumstances: 'Do not resist evil. But if anyone strike you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'.⁵ It is in his passion, when he bears witness as the first martyr to God's truth and gives his wholehearted assent to the will of his Father, transparent in its redemptive love, that we can begin to recognise the many qualities which group themselves around that most christian of all God's gifts, patience. The Father's love is indeed a merciful love, establishing an immediate and essential relationship with every man; and a man becomes like God⁶ because with this love poured out in his heart,⁷ he can lovingly forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven.⁸ This is the love to which Christ bears witness as he is

¹ Acts 23, 1.

² Acts 23, 3.

³ Acts 23, 3.

⁴ Jn 18, 19-21.

⁵ Mt 5, 39.

⁶ Cf Mt 5, 43-48.

⁷ Cf Rom 5, 5.

⁸ Cf Mt 18, 22.

nailed to the cross: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do':¹ the same love in action which characterises the witness of Stephen,² the first to follow in the footsteps of the suffering Christ.³ But it is in the patience of the man Christ, through whom alone we, his brethren, can be transformed into the Father's likeness, 'Who, when he was reviled, did not revile; when he suffered, did not threaten',⁴ that the Father's love reveals itself most strikingly.

Perhaps there has never been a moment in the Church's history when the christian has so much needed to know the full dimensions of Christ's patience and to pray that he and all Christ's members may be possessed of it. In our time, the Church has received a special divine call so to run in the way of the Lord's command as to make effective here and now the Lord's prayer that 'All who believe in me through their word may be one',⁵ to work strenuously for the fulfilment of the Lord's prophecy that there may be one flock, one shepherd.⁶ The over-riding quality necessary to respond to this call, one so often conspicuous by its absence in our dealings with our separated brethren, is patient love. Every father and mother, every husband and wife, knows that what often mars the sincere and loving purpose of family peace and harmony is impatience. Every superior, no matter how exalted in rank, needs patient love above every other quality. It is no over-simplification to say that patience, the patience of Christ, is all that is needed to resolve any crisis of authority – whether this is in the christian family between parents and their teen-age children, or within the Church as a whole, between hierarchy, clergy and laity.

All truly human qualities must find their archetype in Christ. Every other creature is created with him in view, who 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature',⁷ who appeared in history as God's masterpiece, the finest of his works; so that by definition christian virtue can be expressed only in terms of the Christ who reveals his Father to us in the flesh. It seems to have become a habit in this neo-pagan world of ours to separate christian qualities from Christ in order to debase and deride them. It has happened thus with poverty and virginity. It is happening now, even amongst those who sincerely believe that they are spreading God's kingdom, with obedience. It has happened with patience: the

¹ Lk 23, 34.

² Cf Acts 7, 60.

³ Cf 1 Pet 2, 21.

⁴ 1 Pet 2, 23.

⁵ Jn 17, 21.

⁶ Cf Jn 10, 16.

⁷ Heb 1, 3.

christian, it is alleged, merely makes a virtue of necessity because he has neither the wit, the power, nor the courage to make an end of a situation in which he is being oppressed or de-humanised: what cannot be cured must be endured. Yet, as we have seen, even a cursory glance at the suffering Christ reveals a patience and endurance which has nothing in common with a weary resignation in the face of the inevitable. Christ's patience is a power which takes hold of the forces of evil, as they strive to defeat God's purpose, and shapes them according to his will.

In contemplating the historical Christ, we are not considering an apparition or a theophany: as though God's eternal Son were merely dressed up as a man, going through the motions of human living. What we are seeing is a truly human consummation of God's grace which has been at work for centuries in humankind, the fulfilment of God's promise of a son to Abraham; the human product of a gradual spiritual maturing, in whom the virtues of one generation have passed to another and have been developed by being put to fresh uses; much as the scientific knowledge of one generation is developed by its heirs. The many aspects of the virtue of patience¹ are clearly manifested in the bearing of those who responded, in varying degrees of human strength and weakness, to the long-suffering fidelity of God: of Moses, who bore with the childish infidelity and lack of endurance of his people for forty years in the desert, and who at the last could accept being denied his personal entry into the promised land; of a Samuel, who, though humanly exasperated by the refusal of his people to wait for God's direction through the mouth of his prophets, and instead demanded a king, could labour on steadfastly in the way of God, striving to be his instrument in bringing good out of evil.² But it is in the psalmist that the divine patience is faithfully reflected, in the unwavering attitude in face of change and oppression, which manifests the trusting dependence of the creature on his Creator, the steadfast and loving obedience of the child towards his Father. In the familiar *De Profundis*, the psalmist's prayer becomes the

¹ The word most commonly used in the New Testament for the patience of Christ and the christian is *hupomone* and the verb *hupomonein*, cf THE WAY Vol. I (Jan. 1961) p 48; a second word, almost synonymous, is *makrothumia* - cf 1 Tim 1, 16. The same two words are used in the septuagint version of the Old Testament. Cf C. Spicq, *Hupomone-Patientia* in *Révue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques* 19 (1930) pp 95-105; A. G. Festugière, *Hupomone dans la tradition grecque*, *Recherches des Sciences Religieuses* 21 (1931), pp 477-86.

² 1 Sam 12.

attitude of the soul suffering from an overwhelming longing to see God, but content to wait on God's good pleasure:

Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord,

Lord, hear my voice . . .

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

And in his word I hope;

My soul waits for the Lord

More than watchman for the morning . . .¹

The patience of Christ was foreshadowed in the attitude of those who were profoundly aware that God was their origin, and that life's purpose is the search for God's salvation. It is a patience which reflects a confident expectation of the coming of the Saviour, especially in time of persecution and calamity. It draws out of suffering endured an energy which burns with the clear flame of peace and joy, so that tribulation and affliction are the very heralds of the happiness to come. The patience of Christ is reflected in the proverbial patience of Job, of the just man who stands steadfast and unshaken when assailed.² His patience is the gauge of the reality of the divine promises, the proof of God's own fidelity. The author of Ecclesiasticus, writing some hundred years or so before the birth of Christ, explains to us how patience is an essential function of the now mature spirituality of the Old Testament:

My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord,

Prepare yourself for trials.

Set your heart aright and be steadfast,

And do not allow yourself to be swept off your feet in time
of calamity.

Cleave to the Lord and do not leave him . . .

Take what comes and be patient amidst those ups and downs
that humiliate you.

For gold is purified in the fire

And God's chosen in the fire of humiliation.

Trust in God and he will help you,

Follow a straight path and hope in him.

You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy;

Do not turn aside from his way, lest you fall.

You who fear the Lord, trust in him

And your reward will not fail.

You who fear the Lord, hope for good things,

For everlasting joy and mercy.³

¹ Ps 129. Cf also Pss 5, 30, 25, 73.

² Cf Jas 5, 7-11.

³ Sir 2, 1-9.

The lesson is recapitulated in the first epistle of St Peter, in terms of Christ's bearing and attitude in time of suffering: 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you'.¹ Here the apostle echoes the prophecy of Isaiah, that the spirit of the Lord is to rest upon the Messiah: words used by our Lord himself after he has been led into the desert to be proved by the tempter.²

The same power of patience, upon which others can rely and from which they can draw strength, is promised to Peter, just before he is 'swept off his feet in time of calamity': he will be sifted by Satan, but the power and the glory of the Lord will eventually 'set his heart right and make him steadfast'. Nor was Peter alone in losing patience: all the apostles fled, the memory of the Lord's unswerving fidelity to his promises driven from their hearts by panic. Later, after the descent of the Spirit, they were to inherit a patience which would enable them to rejoice at being considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus.³

Though it is true that the christian cannot model himself externally or in detail on Christ's human conduct as it is revealed to us in the gospel, the apostolic preaching bids us: 'Take your standard from his patient endurance, from the enmity that the wicked bore him, and you will not grow faint, you will not find your souls unmanned'.⁴ For he is not only the author and perfecter of our faith, but that faith's perfection. Nowhere is this so clearly shown as when the values which Christ upholds clash with those human values which do not take their origin from him; or when the kingdom over which he reigns is set in opposition to the kingdom which is of this world alone.⁵ By faith, Christ dwells in our hearts,⁶ and by faith we receive his spirit. In this belief, the God of hope fills us with joy and peace, so that by the power of the holy Spirit we may abound in hope.⁷ The patience and steadfastness of Christ, as he faces those who oppose themselves to him and his kingdom, as he passes through the fire of his passion and crucifixion, is the manifestation of this power of the holy Spirit, which in us is the gift of hope. We are to 'hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,

¹ 1 Pet 4, 12-14.

² Isai 11, 2-3.

³ Acts 5, 41.

⁴ Heb 12, 3.

⁵ Cf Jn 18, 33-7.

⁶ Cf Eph 3, 17.

⁷ Rom 15, 13.

for he who promised is faithful'; this is why we are to 'consider how to stir up one another to love and do good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another'.¹

Ours is 'a better hope' than the hope of those who endured in steadfast perseverance before the coming of Christ, because we have witnessed the fulfilment of the promise on which their patience rested; our High Priest has come and ushered in the sacrifice of redemptive love.² Because we share in this sacrifice, we receive a power which enables us to be patient to the end.³ We live in the time of Christ, when this power manifests itself to the believer in the patience of his members, in their love for him and for each other.

Patience, then, as preached by the apostles, is a purified constancy which is the guarantee of hope and an indispensable condition for reaching the goal – 'the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'.⁴

Christ insisted with his apostles that suffering was necessary for him in order that he might enter into his glory,⁵ and that it is by patient endurance that we too shall win true life.⁶ Paul similarly insists that the peace which comes to us through our Lord Jesus Christ depends on his grace, by means of which we stand firm and 'rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit which has been given to us'.⁷ In his letter to Titus he links patience with faith and love.⁸ And when he comes to describe Christ and the faithful christian in terms of charity, he begins by saying that charity is patient, and ends: 'charity bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'.⁹

The patience which Christ taught and practised cannot be summed up as a moral virtue, an emotive response, or even a settled belief: it is all these at once and in varying proportions. The christian is a faithful reflection of Christ in his human nature. To be a christian demands sincere love of, and confidence in the Father of our Lord Christ, and the faithful practice of the moral life which Christ expounded and lived himself. It demands an attitude of mind which enables a man to keep on in the most adverse and trying circumstances, in what appears to be a soul-destroying

¹ Heb 10, 23-25.

² Heb 7, 19.

³ Mt 24, 13.

⁴ Phil 3, 14.

⁵ Lk 24, 26.

⁶ Lk 21, 19.

⁷ Rom 5, 1-5.

⁸ Cf Titus 2, 2.

⁹ 1 Cor 13, 4-8.

monotony; it means that a father never wearies of correcting with love and an indomitable will to understand his wayward children. It means a personal concern for all who cross our paths; it means giving Christ's answer to the question which faces us, day in, day out, 'Who is my neighbour?' For the faithful israelite this patience was rooted in confident expectation of the Lord's visitation: either immediately, his coming in power and strength to defeat the enemies of the israelite in battle, or eventually in the coming of Christ in the fulness of time. For the christians of the apostolic age, it was rooted in the anxious waiting for the *parousia*, the day and the hour of which was unknown, but which must be soon. When, in the generations which followed, that time of waiting was prolonged, this hope and expectation was made more intense by persecution; so that the end longed for became the individual's death and hope of reunion with Christ. But no matter what form the hope takes, it is always actual, even as the power to endure is actual – the indwelling of the blessed Trinity. The aspiration of the loving heart will always be that of the last inspired word of scripture: 'Come, Lord Jesus'. For us, as for the christians to whom Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp¹ addressed their letters, the patience of Christ is the expression of the power of the Spirit which vivifies and is at work establishing God's kingdom in the world and in every individual soul. It is in and through this patience that we possess our souls, that we are masters of ourselves and expect, in contentment and confidence, though gradually and in God's own good time, to overcome our weaknesses in and through Christ, and to attain to that perfection of purification which the fulness of union will demand of us. It is by this same patience that Christ will purify us and establish his reign in the hearts of all who depend in any way upon us for their salvation.

We might say that Pope John XXIII defined patience for our modern age when he wrote: 'Not to try to predict the future, indeed not to count on any future at all: that is my rule of conduct, inspired by that spirit of tranquillity and constancy from which the faithful and my collaborators must receive light and encouragement . . . I must make myself familiar with the thought of the end, not with dismay which saps the will, but with confidence which preserves our enthusiasm for living, working, serving'.²

¹ Polycarp, speaking of the letters of Ignatius says that 'they deal with faith, patient endurance and with matters that bear on spiritual growth in the Lord'. *Ancient Christian Writers*, no 6 (1948) p 75. Cf Clement on 1 Cor 2,9. ACW no 1 (1949) p 30.

² *Journal of a Soul* (London, 1965), p 313, 276.