

THE SOURCE OF CONFIDENCE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE things that are happening today in the Church of God are enough to make anyone lose their nerve. In the old days, at least you knew who you were and where you were. You were a Catholic, pure and simple. You used to be able to get a little card with a St Christopher badge on it to protect you against accident which stated: 'I am a Catholic. In case of accident please call a priest'. But today that straightforward statement would have to be qualified in some way or other. Perhaps: 'I am an anti-vernacular Catholic. Please call a priest who will administer the last rites in latin'; or: 'I am an agnostic Catholic. Please invoke the ground-of-being'; or: 'I am a primitive christian. Get the fellow who hit me'. In the old days, there were all sorts of things by which you could identify yourself. Eating fish on Fridays, for example: that identified you to yourself and to everybody else. People could say, 'We'd better not invite Mark, because it's a Friday and he's a Catholic, and we'll all have to have fish'. Nowadays there is talk about abolishing the Friday abstinence, and never a protest – except from the fishmongers.

You really do not know where you stand. You find yourself labelled progressive by the conservatives and conservative by the progressives. You listen to people who hail the Vatican Council as the greatest step forward since Sinai and the sermon on the mount; and to others who seem to regard it as the greatest disaster since the day Eve allowed herself to be charmed by the snake. They do say that it is a great and stimulating age to live in; but in our heart of hearts, some of us treat such affirmations with the same reserve as the recommendation that a cold bath first thing in the morning gives a zest to life: the very thought gives us goose pimples.

It can all seem very distressing and bewildering. We may live in an age of insecurity (the amount of insurance we buy is a broad enough hint), but must this insecurity spill over into our religious life? Familiar institutions, habits of thought and ways of worship are all being passed through the sieve – or is it the mincing ma-

chine? – and as we watch them disappear we may feel that God is disappearing with them. We feel as old Serapion did in the desert. He found out that he was, unwittingly, an anthropomorphite heretic; and he duly renounced his heresy. But when he came to join in the general prayer of thanksgiving for his retraction, he suddenly fell sobbing on the ground and cried out; ‘Woe is me, wretch that I am. They have taken away my God’.¹ Our sentiments may be the same as we watch the St Sulpice statuary being carried, feet first, out of the church to a reverent cremation. Just when we were getting along quite nicely thank you, content with ourselves, suddenly we find we are not as we thought we were. According to our temperaments, we may either retire hurriedly into the comfortable old shell and say nothing; or else behave as if the parousia was upon us: and, lamb-like, begin a premature fraternization with the lion who is still seeking whom he may devour. But, one way or another, by withdrawal or aggressiveness, we are all trying to find reassurance. We are all searching for our identity. The experience is unnerving and unsettling. But perhaps this is just the reason for it.

The whole bible should prepare us to be continually surprised and disconcerted by the diversity and multiplicity of the ways of God. Everyone of us can expect that, some day or other, we shall wake up like Jacob and exclaim in wonder: ‘Surely, the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it’.² All of us can expect to share the joyful amazement of the disciples at Emmaus as it dawned on them that the Lord had been their companion. Our God is the God of the unpredictable and unexpected. We must be on our guard against limiting him to one or two possibilities. He can never be indissolubly wedded to one particular type of church architecture, to a certain style of theology, to a certain number of devotional practices, no matter how ancient or modern any of these may be. If we limit God within the narrow scope of our own perceptions of him and of our human possibilities, we may find ourselves lifted up by the hair of our heads, like Habbakuk, and transported into a land we have never seen.³

Individually and collectively we have to re-live the basic religious experience of the chosen people of God. The God who chose and moulded Israel is the same God who, in Christ, brought his choice to fruition in the new Israel, the new people of God; and his

¹ Cf Cassian, *Collations* 10, 3.

² Gen 28, 16.

³ Cf Dan 14, 33–36.

pedagogy of Israel is the key to his pedagogy of his new people in the Spirit. From the beginning, God refused to identify himself except by the mysterious title Yahweh. To Moses, who would look on his face, he replied: 'Man shall not see me and live'.¹ For his people he was an all-pervading presence, permeating every aspect of their lives: but a presence which remained nonetheless mysterious and hidden. The sin of Israel was to demand from him a visible sign of his powerful presence, a sign of their own choosing whereby they could identify him. When he refused this, they made signs for themselves.

Time and again, through the prophets, Yahweh made his appeal to his people. In the name of his creative power he rejected all the exterior signs to which Israel had transferred its faith, and invited them to return to him, their Creator and Redeemer. When the appeal to the heart failed, he led his people through the purifying experience of exterior calamity. In the crucible of deportation and exile, with their Temple destroyed and their nation scattered, the remnant of Israel refined their relationship with God who had made them. The wise of Israel learnt that even when all the exterior structures of religion had disappeared, their God was still close to them, still forging their destiny. With their complacency shattered they could accept that the pagan Cyrus could be the servant of their God; and by the waters of Babylon they found the Lord in their sorrow. Stripped by force of all pride in the work of their own hands, they began to understand the meaning of the words: 'Unless the Lord build the house they labour in vain who build it'.² It was not enough for Israel to proclaim proudly: 'This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord', and find in that edifice the source of their confidence.³ Such complacency was an abomination to Yahweh who demanded that they find their assurance in him alone who had made them.

But the lesson was learned only by the few. In Christ's day, the ancient sin of Israel still blinded many to his message. The error of many of the Jews was that they had reduced God to a human institution. A certain type of legal righteousness, of correct behaviour and respectability had become the equivalent of godliness, even of the presence of God. Men had become so preoccupied with their skill in observing the minutiae of the red print of the rubrics that they had forgotten to read and understand the black print. They trusted in their own righteousness.

¹ Exod 34, 20.

² Ps 126, 1.

³ Cf Jer 7, 12-15.

Great then was their astonishment and indignation when Jesus, from Nazareth, of all places, announced that God could raise children to Abraham out of the stones; that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath; that true adorers worshipped in spirit and truth first of all; that the kingdom of God was not a construction of man; and that prostitutes and tax-gatherers would enter that kingdom before the professionally religious and 'churchy' people. Many heard in such words a threat to the purity of their religion and hence a blasphemy: a menace even to the national destiny to whose furtherance they had made religion subservient. As John the Baptist had warned them, the axe was being laid to the root of the tree, and they felt their complacent world shudder at each stroke. They asked for signs and Jesus gave only the sign of his own death and resurrection. He saw through their loaded questions and baffled them with his answers. Continually he brought them up against their own insufficiencies – they who were so self-sufficient. He made them feel insecure in that very sphere of the law where they thought they had maximum security. Not that Christ, any more than the prophets, had come to invalidate the law: but he had come to restore to it a meaning that only God could give. He had come to give it a dimension far beyond the limits of human jurisprudence and human categories.

But their complacency made the jews deaf to his invitation to a change of heart. In the name of law they crucified him; and therefore felt quite justified with what they had done. Justified, but still uneasy enough to ask Pilate, – another who had looked truth in the face and turned away, – to post guards, just in case Jesus' disciples did what they would have done themselves in the same circumstances to save their own faces.

Even to his own followers Christ was one who revealed to them the thoughts of their inmost hearts. Their growing faith in him led them to a constant reassessment of their own selves as they drew nearer to the heart of the mystery of Christ himself. Peter's act of adoration before the divine power which he recognized in Christ led to the invitation to become a fisher of men, to accept a destiny not of his own choosing.¹ His profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi was the occasion for Christ to invite him to enter into the mystery of his death and resurrection.² But Peter was a prey to the temptation to identify Christ with his own ideas. Later on, despite Christ's

¹ Cf Lk 5, 1–13.

² Cf Mt 16, 13–23.

solemn warning, Peter insists on identifying himself: 'Even if they all fall away I will not deny you'; but, to give him his due, 'they all said the same'.¹ It was not until the experience of the death and resurrection of his Lord had stripped from Peter all his human self-reliance and cocksureness that he was able to understand the full meaning of his life with Christ. For when Christ asked him to identify himself: 'Do you love me more than these?' he was content to leave that judgement to the Lord: 'You know everything, you know that I love you'.² Now he will no longer go his own way, but will be led along a road not of his own choosing.

Peter had learnt, and his lesson is exemplary for the Church, that Christ is not to be identified by reference to ourselves. He is never understood once and for all. To live with him is to enter into an experience which absorbs the whole of life, and to which there is no predictable earthly accomplishment. It means living in the Spirit who comes whence we know not and whose final destination in this world is unknown to us. The corollary is that we ourselves are never understood once and for all. Our life is hidden with Christ in God; we are caught up into his mystery. To be a christian means to be continually in the process of rediscovering Christ, and through and with him to rediscover ourselves, our fellow men, and the whole universe which finds in him alone its coherence and meaning.

To be a christian is not to be thought of simply as a state. It is a becoming. There is no contradiction in St. John's words: 'Beloved, we are God's children now, it does not yet appear what we shall be'.³ Between what we are and what, in hopeful faith, we reach out towards, is situated that whole process of becoming which is human history, become, and yet still becoming, sacred history in Christ. We all have absolute certainty that we are the children of God, and we know him in whom we believe. We know that God will never repent of his choice, and that having chosen us he will lead us to that destiny which is an integral part of his choice. But that sureness of faith does not exclude on our side doubts and difficulties and mistakes, as we strive to express in terms of our human living the mystery of God's choice, and of the plan which has been revealed to us: to restore all things in Christ. For Christ did not come into the world to stop the course of human history, but to lead it to emerge from the confining chrysalis of human achievement within which it is ever tempted to enclose itself. Christ came to offer man

¹ Mk 14, 29-31.

² Jn 21, 15-19.

³ 1 Jn 3, 2.

a destiny which, of himself, he can neither conceive nor achieve. But he did this without in any way destroying human initiative and liberty. Rather his presence at the heart of human history makes it possible for man to outreach the confines of human liberty and to become free with the liberty of the sons of God. For each of us, our baptismal *fiat* is the engagement of ourselves in a process of becoming the sons of God by making Christ the unique term of reference in our lives. We are no longer the sole judges of our own history: all judgement has been given to the Son, and we have to submit our history to his judgement.

The sin which has marked man from the beginning is precisely that of wanting to imprison himself and the whole of creation within the terms of human vision. Man has wanted to be his own judge of what is right and wrong: to be like God, knowing good and evil. He has wanted to define God in terms of himself: to identify himself and the universe by means of his own accomplishments and possibilities. His sin has even been 'to make his own might his God'.¹ Hence God's continual warning to his people: 'Beware lest you say in your heart, My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth. You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day'.² Entering into a sinful history, Christ accepted that his Father should manifest the power of his covenant through the impotence of human limitations. God made man, he accepted the destiny to become the first born out of the dead. His way of humiliation, of service, of love to the uttermost limit of death, accepted as the way to the Father, is the direct antithesis of all by which man would define himself: success, authority, independence and life itself. Christ gathered together in himself all that in human terms is the annihilation of man as the ultimate term of reference, and through that achieved for the whole of mankind the destiny which sets him above and at the heart of all creation: 'Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him a name which is above every name'.³ So Christ turns to man and says to him: 'Without me you can do nothing'.⁴

It is St Paul in prison who draws from this the logical conclusion: 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me'.⁵ In Christ, man is again united with the creative and redemptive power of God.

Hab 1, 11. ² Deut 8, 17-18. ³ Phil 2, 9. ⁴ Jn 15, 5. ⁵ Phil 4, 13.

Human self-confidence is established on its surest basis, the unsailable power of God which alone can work its will, not merely in spite of human limitations, but actually through them. In Christ, man learns that he is 'God's workmanship, created in Jesus Christ for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them'.¹ We are created in Christ in the image and likeness of a Creator who never ceases his work; so that to be a creature is to be creative, to participate in the dynamic, creative power of God, which can be defined only in terms of the inexhaustible richness of divine being. In Christ, man is re-created in the image and likeness of the Redeemer; so that to be redeemed means that the life of man must be redemptive. The christian is one who is borne along on the movement of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension by the power of the Spirit of love poured into his heart. This is the first confidence which he must hold to the end,² which finds its source, not in the shallow waters of human accomplishment and self-reliance, but in the mystery of God, Creator and Redeemer and lover of mankind, revealed in Christ as the very mystery of man himself.

Christ is the source and the final term of all creation and of all redemption. His is the only name under heaven whereby man is saved. In himself, Christ unites all that is human accomplishment and that is divine. He unites them not as two opposites, but as two realities revealed in the unity of his own person as interior to each other. For the christian, there can be no human accomplishment which cannot ultimately lead to Christ; nor can there be any truly redemptive work which does not further the creative activity of God. There is no division into a spiritual life and a human life; there is but one integral life lived in Christ. Or rather each human life, and the whole of human history, is a movement towards this integration, which will finally be revealed only in the second coming of Christ. For the present, we are working towards the becoming of him who is eternally present.

It follows that we cannot identify the plenitude of Christ with any particular stage of our individual history or of universal history. Nor can we identify our relationship with him with any particular stage of that relationship: as, for example, our childhood 'innocence', our first fervour. The mystery of his becoming is ours too. There was a time when christianity had no churches, no parishes, no religious orders, no catholic education, no episcopal and clerical titles and

¹ Eph 2, 8-10.

² Heb 3, 14.

garb. This, of course, does not mean that we can dispense with these lightly now. Because there was a day when there was no electricity does not mean that we should go back to the rush light and the oil lamp. But the progress from rush light to electric bulb should keep our minds open to further developments, and prevent us from thinking that, like Kansas City, 'we've gone about as far as we kin go'. The object of human living in any of its aspects can never be simply to preserve a status quo, much less to hark back nostalgically to the good old days. Much more so, our religious life can never be the mere preservation of habits acquired in the past. Our true permanence lies always ahead, as the permanence of humanity lies in the children yet to be born. We belong to a pilgrim Church in a pilgrim world, which, in Christ, is going to the Father, but has not yet arrived.

It is the great virtue of this age, (and how old Father Parmenides must love us), to have understood in some measure that change, transformation, progress is part of human nature. It is the weakness of this age to have applied this truth unthinkingly; to have seen the relativity of many things and to have concluded to the absence of any absolutes. On a religious level it is an undoubted fact that many things, in themselves purely relative, were given an absolute value. But sheer duration in time can never transform what is relative into an absolute; and no amount of quantity can ever increase quality. Failure to perceive this may lead to bewilderment, whenever an emphasis on quality demands a reduction in quantity. The reduction of the amount of the breviary is not a sign of laxity but of an emphasis on quality. The mere quantity of the use of latin in the liturgy has been seen by some as adding something to the unity of the Church. But that unity is a qualitative thing, which the use or disuse of latin can never increase or diminish; and arguments for or against a vernacular liturgy must be based on other premisses. Today the Church is not calling in judgement her faith in Christ; she is reassessing the way in which that faith has been translated into the relativity of the structures of human living. The identity of the Son of God is not in question, but our identification of him is. We have to ask ourselves too, not only how we have identified him for ourselves and be content with that; for too long that inward look has satisfied us. We have to ask ourselves as well how we have identified, and are identifying, Christ for and with the world which was created and redeemed in him, and into which he has sent us to be his witnesses.

Faith in Christ demands of us a constant readiness to learn, to become disciples. We have to grow constantly in the aptitude to be continually transformed through a history which has Christ at its centre. We must allow ourselves to be recreated and remoulded from day to day by him who alone remains the same today and for ever. This faith in the ineffacable creative and redemptive presence of Christ should give us the confidence to face the difficulties and oppositions bound up with human life. In Christ, God has called us out of ourselves to be his sons; and in the name of that relationship he sends us into a world where we must search with him for mankind. But, whilst we look upon our own inconsistency, we have to be ready to admit the relativity of any measures we may take in our co-operation with God. In this sense we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling; not because it is uncertain, but because we are uncertain human beings.

This is the balance to be achieved as we live again the mystery of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ in the mass. Here, through the sacrament of the word of God given to us, and the body and blood become our food through sacrifice, we constantly submit our lives to the judgement of God in Christ. Here, we, the faithful, gathered as members of a Church which is the sacrament of the world, make present that world before God. We offer to God our whole lives and through them all that, in Christ, the Father is continually creating, sanctifying, bringing to life and making more abundant by his blessing. The judgement of God in Christ at the mass is one of love and mercy and power; for there he sees all things as transformable into the likeness of his Son, through whom and with whom and in whom all things give him glory. Here Christ invites us to find salvation, not by burying our talents with the object of preserving them for ourselves, but by spending them with him for the benefit of mankind. Here we are liberated from the appalling burden of attempting to establish our identity in terms of personal success and failure. Here we find the courage to take up again a fully human task with absolute confidence that, far from separating us from God, human history with all its triumphs and failures is the very stuff out of which salvation is being moulded.

Perhaps, after all, it is a stimulating and invigorating age to live in. Perhaps the trouble lies with ourselves who are loath to be stimulated and invigorated, slow and foolish of heart not to have learnt the lesson of sacred history, and not to have realised that the companion of our pilgrimage is the risen and victorious Lord.