

I AM WITH YOU

By JAMES WALSH

HERE IS, perhaps, no gospel text more familiar to the average adult catholic than the last two verses of Matthew. Here we have, as we learnt from our catechism as children, a clear scriptural warrant for the Lord's institution of the sacrament of baptism, for the sacramental and teaching mission of the Church, and in particular clear proof of the indefectibility and infallibility of the Church: 'I know that the Church is infallible because Christ promised . . . that he himself would be with her all days even to the consummation of the world'. It is doubtful whether the average pastor of thirty or forty years ago would have applied these words to the celebration of the paschal mystery or to the dynamic presence of the Spirit in the heart of every committed christian. The image was rather that of the rock which could withstand any buffeting, any onslaught of the gates of hell; of the fortress within whose confines all were safe, even though beleaguered.

The Second Vatican Council has proclaimed the end of the siege and has in large measure broken down many of our rigid categories of thought about the nature and the mission of the Church. The word Church no longer automatically conjures up the image of a solid stone structure; instead, the word invites us to contemplate our own vocation as God's people and the mystery of our intimate union with him in the risen Christ. Through the liturgical and catechical renewal, we understand more clearly what it is that Christ sent his apostles to teach and to bear witness to: the good news of God's loving forgiveness in Christ – a love that transforms us into new creatures, and maintains us in this newness of life by the dynamic presence and action of his Spirit. We understand, too, that this mission has been entrusted not merely to the successors of the apostles but to the whole Church. This people of God 'may at times have the appearance of a little flock',¹ as it certainly did at the ascension. It is not merely to the apostles and their successors that the priestly and prophetic mission is assigned: 'all the disciples of Christ, persevering in prayer and praising God, should offer themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Everywhere on earth they must bear witness to Christ'.²

Nor is it simply the teacher in Israel, the friend and master of the

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

² *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

apostles, who proclaims his presence amongst them in these words 'I am with you'. It is the risen Lord, the glorified Son, with whom and in whom are the Father and the Holy Spirit: 'All power is given to me in heaven and on earth. As the Father sends me, I also send you . . . Receive the holy Spirit'.¹

The apostles, and the community of believers who first heard the good news, would have been fully alive to the implications of the Lord's promise 'I am with you'. In the past, whenever the Lord had chosen and sent men to speak in his name, to make known what he had commanded, he always assured them that they were not alone. When he promised Jacob that his people would spread over the whole earth, he said to him: 'Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go'.² It was the same with Moses: 'Go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak'.³ When Joshua and all the people were being sent into the promised land, the Lord said: 'No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses so I shall be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you'.⁴ When the prophet Ezekiel was sent, 'the Spirit entered into him';⁵ and when Samuel anointed David, 'the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him from that day forward'.⁶

'Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'. The message which the people of God are sent to proclaim is the good news as recorded by Matthew. His gospel is no mere detached and objective account of the words and deeds of the historical Jesus – of a great teacher who once lived but is now dead. It is the message of the living and risen Christ as seen through the eyes of the community of believers who have experienced, and are experiencing now, the impact of his message in the light of the divine power and authority which the resurrection has conferred upon him. For God's people, it is this Christ who says: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy". But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven'.⁷ This teaching of Christ has for its substance the love that must exist in the new people of the new age. It is a love that demands constant prayer and petition from the children of the Father; a love that is seen to be impossible without the possession of the Spirit.⁸ One can give

¹ Jn. 20, 21–22.

⁴ Jos 1, 5.

⁷ Mt 5, 43–45.

² Gen 28, 14–15.

⁵ Ezek 2, 2.

⁸ Lk 11, 9–13; Mt 7, 7–11.

³ Exod 4, 12.

⁶ I Sam 16, 13.

through the ties of natural love, but the new people, who have God for their Father, can ask and receive the holy Spirit. The conclusion of the Lord's teaching here is stated in terms of the golden rule: 'Whatever you wish men to do to you, do so to them. This is the law and the prophets'. It is a sentiment that apparently any humanist of any colour or creed would subscribe to – a gloss on the great commandment 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. It must be confessed that the Abou ben Adam interpretation of the divine-human relationship seems to accord well with the apparent overshadowing, in John's first epistle, of the love of God by the love of neighbour. To interpret thus would, of course, be to reduce the relationship between God and man to that which exists between human persons who are truly neighbourly, in the sense of the parable of the good samaritan. The humanist can accept the suggestion that the samaritan was the real neighbour to him who fell among thieves without cavil; whilst Christ remains a dim figure in the past who preached a gospel of brotherly love and a better world. And his presence would mean nothing more than that men were striving to live according to his teaching, his spirit; 'I am Christ to others, others are Christ to me'. This is not much different from the gospel according to the poet Terence: 'I consider nothing human as foreign to me'.

It is true that there are many examples outside christianity of true neighbourly love in the sense of the parable of the good samaritan, of the heart being moved by pity for a person in distress, which is not an emotional extravagance, but a real hard-headed unsentimental readiness to help – and not because it is one's job, like the doctor or the nurse. It appears to have nothing to do with protestations of universal love for all men; it is simply loving on the spot, as one loves oneself, anyone, natural friend or enemy, by seeing what can be done and what has to be done. This is certainly the Lord's command; this is what he sends his Church to teach and to do; this is how the christian life is in fact lived, and this is the love which proclaims it. But the Lord also teaches that where this love is truly operative then he and his Spirit are truly present: 'If we love one another, then we have God dwelling in us, and the love of God has reached its full growth in our lives. This is our proof that we are dwelling in him and he in us, he has given us a share in his own Spirit'.¹ We have to say, then, that if a man loves like this, if this

¹ 1 Jn 4, 12-13.

love is the settled ideal of his living, then he has Christ and the Spirit of Christ dwelling in him, whether he knows it and acknowledges it or not. What makes this love possible as a conscious ideal, accepted as such, even if our attainments fall woefully short, is that its foundation and well-spring is the merciful love of God as a permanent factor in human history through the death and resurrection of Christ: the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins as an event.

What has revealed the love of God, where we are concerned, is that he has sent his only-begotten Son into the world so that we might have life through him. That love resides, not in our showing any love for God, but in his showing love for us first, when he sent out his Son to be an atonement for our sins. Beloved, if God has shown such love to us, we too must love one another.¹

When this forgiving love has been 'poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit who has been given to us'² a new life begins: the life of one who because she is forgiven much can love much.³ The forgiveness puts a person in a completely new situation, living a new life, which is now filled with that love and is guided by it in every action.

The forgiving merciful event which creates a new life, and therefore founds a new people, is the single-minded sacrificial death of Christ: 'Greater love than this no man hath . . .' Paul is astounded at it:

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more now that we are reconciled shall we be saved by his life.⁴

This redemptive event of forgiveness, and the merciful love which it releases, is never over and done with. The Gospel indicates that we shall still need to request forgiveness, constantly; but the love

¹ 1 Jn 4, 9–10.

⁴ Rom 5, 6–9.

² Rom 5, 5.

³ Lk 7, 47.

released will demand a constant readiness to forgive in the way in which the most merciful Father – *clementissime pater* – forgives, not seven times, but seventy times seven.

It is in the sacramental liturgy that this forgiving loving act is signified and re-enacted – the loving death and the loving triumph over sin and death. Similarly, the liturgy is the point where the answering love is released – the readiness for service, sacrifice, forgiveness and consideration of others, for healing them and building them up. This constant renewal of the redemptive act releases this forgiving love, the heavenly gift which surpasses all others,¹ re-created and offered by Christ sacrificially present in the offering, and proclaimed as present in the *agape*, the feast in which love is given and received.

In the dialectic of asking and receiving this loving forgiveness which is the holy sacrifice, we begin by confessing our sins to God, to all the Church in heaven and to each other. At the climax of the liturgy of the Word, the minister acknowledges the forgiving power of God's word when he prays that our sins be blotted out by the words of the gospel. As the offerings are prepared, the minister again expresses the constant need of God's people for forgiveness; and the great prayer of consecration opens with a cry to the most merciful Father who will forgive us as we forgive others; the blood of his Son is shed for the forgiveness of our sins – the blood of the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. It is in our awareness of his loving presence and action in us that the one bread makes us one body, though we are many in number.

Our words and our gestures in the liturgy should reveal the thoughts of our heart; or rather, as the Constitution says, borrowing from St Benedict, our 'thoughts should match our words';² they should indicate that the repeated mutual prayer of priest and people is answered – that the Lord is indeed with us, and that his pardon and peace are freely communicated from one to another. It is important, therefore, that we should face one another and see one another, be heard and understood. We do not normally communicate with someone by inaudible mumblings or thoughtless formulae, nor express our love for him to the back of his neck, or from the far end of a tunnel. It was in the context of common petition that the Lord promised his Father's gift and his own presence;³ and while it is true that when 'we do not know how to pray as we ought, the

¹ 1 Cor 13.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11.

³ Mt 18, 19–20.

spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words',¹ it is a fact that the directive of the Constitution on the Liturgy with regard to the bidding prayers² is so often carried out in a totally passive and mechanical way, without thought or preparation, so that ultimately they are provided from on high or from a printed book. We do not need folksy tunes, guitars or the appurtenances of the kitchen efficaciously to indicate that the God whom we love is present to the community and knows each one;³ but we do need to know one another, to break out of that anonymity of the secular city which is the antithesis of loving community. If, as Paul says, it is especially in the household of the faith that we are to fulfil the law of love,⁴ then we need smaller and more varied units for liturgical celebration. The various parish organisations which devote themselves to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy are not necessarily out-moded. They can be revived, regain their sense of purpose, by appropriate liturgical celebration; this should, incidentally, help to offset the petty rivalries and jealousies and the subconscious self-seeking which so often bedevil 'charitable organisations'. If the loving and forgiving presence of the redeeming Christ is thus manifested regularly in the various sections of the christian community, parochial and non-parochial, the people of God will be more easily gathered into one at the weekly celebration of the Lord's resurrection.

All this said, it remains true that Christ's presence to us and our presence to him is of its nature only imperfectly apprehensible. Though one with him in a new being, knowledge of this being and this oneness is of a different order from the reflective awareness of ourselves. Normally speaking, it is only by love that we know, that he reveals himself to us: 'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him'.⁵ Ultimately, in all our half-hearted attempts to please him, what we seek and what we desire is to 'come and behold the face of God'.⁶ But 'we know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not by sight'.⁷ In our relations with one another, it is so much easier to be brothers in the flesh than in the Lord.⁸ We may be convinced in theory that the love of Christ controls us because we are convinced in faith

¹ Rom 8, 26.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 53.

³ 1 Cor 8, 3.

⁴ Gal 6, 10.

⁵ Jn 14, 21.

⁶ Ps 41, 2.

⁷ 2 Cor 5, 6-7.

⁸ Cf Phm 16.

'that one has died for all; therefore all have died, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised';¹ but we rarely experience all this in the flesh. We are much more aware of living for ourselves, even in the giving of ourselves to each other. The liturgy is the only effective recall of what we owe him in terms of love; and in the liturgy we are empowered to do, in and with him, what he does for all. He assures us that whatever we do for the least of his brethren, we do for him, and that in this way we shall certainly come and see the face of our God. It is in this love, a more than human love, that we are in him and he in us; in this love we teach one another to do what he has commanded. Through this love, which is the life of the Spirit, he is with us all our days, even to the close of the age.

¹ 2 Cor 5, 14-15.