

I HAVE SEEN THE LORD

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

HAD MARY MAGDALEN been a little more 'with it', she could have said that on the first easter morning she had had a 'significant encounter'. We beg your pardon – significant encounters are not 'had', they are experienced. However, inculpably ignorant as she was of modern religious jargon, she translated her experience into the simple phrase – I have seen the Lord. Those five words, the original good news, contain the essential message of christianity. For the christian is one who affirms in all he is and does that he has seen the Lord. He is one who communicates his experience boldly in the face of an unbelieving, sceptical, or even hostile world.

But this is not all. Mary announced joyfully that she had seen the Lord, but, had he not called her by name, she would have gone on mistaking him for the gardener. Similarly, the two on the road to Emmaus would have remembered only a sympathetic companion, had the Lord not broken bread before them. Later, a stranger on the shore shows by a miracle that he is the Lord, and not just an inquisitive bystander. In fact, as the story of Paul on the road to Damascus shows so dramatically, all the witnesses of the risen One saw the Lord only because he wanted them to see him. They were all vividly aware that it was only through the free gift of God that they were able to proclaim that Jesus is the Lord. They gave to others because they had themselves received from the plenitude of Christ. For christianity is not simply a faith which happens to be communicable. It is part of a movement of God giving himself to man in Christ through the Spirit. To proclaim that one has seen the Lord is to enter into this movement of giving. For the faith which does not seek to communicate itself is a faith without charity or hope, a barren thing with no power and no future.

It is obvious from the gospel accounts that the risen Lord did not reveal himself to his followers in some transcendent vision of the glory of God which replaced their faith. The result of seeing the risen Lord was to restore faith to those who had faltered and even momentarily foundered before Calvary. There was no doubt in the apostles' minds that God had made himself known to them through

the Son who is nearest to the Father's heart; but they also knew that they had never come face to face with God, whom no man can see and still live. Hence, even though John can write of Thabor, 'we have seen his glory', he can still affirm that 'no man has ever seen God'. Paul too, after his conversion and his being caught up into the third heaven, can still assert that we see now in a mirror dimly and we know only in part. It was given to Stephen alone in the moment of his death to gaze into heaven and see the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Faith was not replaced by seeing the risen One, but it took on a new dimension. It was a faith which had learned through contact with the risen Christ to go beyond any selfish need for reassurance. As the apostles sat round the fire having breakfast none of them dared ask him, 'who are you?' They knew it was the Lord. They were learning not to demand from the Lord, as Thomas had done, some sort of identity card. Paradoxically, the appearances of the risen Lord led the apostles to a peaceful acceptance of his going away. There is all the difference in the world between the near despair which swept over them after the death of Christ and the joy and unity which was theirs after his ascension. For on this latter occasion they understood that his going away was the beginning of a movement of return. Their faith was strong enough for them to let Christ take from them that familiar presence of Jesus of Nazareth in order to become even more present to them in the Spirit and in the sacramental sign of the Church. Their faith had matured so that now they no longer clung frantically to some tangible sign, like Magdalen holding on to her risen master, or Peter wishing to establish himself permanently on Thabor. Henceforth they were fitted to fulfil their mission of preaching Christ and him crucified and of leading men to recognize the risen One in the Jesus of Nazareth who died on the cross.

We should not imagine that in some way it was easier for the apostles because they had seen the risen Lord. Far from eliminating difficulties, the resurrection created them. It would have been reasonable and acceptable for many people to accept Christ as a good man who had been cruelly treated and whose unjust death was one of the enigmas of history. A pious or philanthropic society dedicated to keeping his memory alive might have attracted many. But once Christ rose the whole thing was unreasonable. Because of the resurrection, the death on the cross becomes unacceptable to the religious sensibilities of the Jews and the intellectual convictions of

the gentiles. What is more, it is only the resurrection which gives to the gospel a universal application and obliges its preachers to teach all nations. Because of the resurrection the gospel becomes, not the message of a few like minded people to their sympathizers, but the message which belongs to Jesus the Lord and is therefore endowed with his own universality and authority. Without the resurrection there could have been no talk or need of faith; and it is only the resurrection which shows the need of faith and reveals the precise point of faith: belief that Jesus who died on the cross is the same Jesus who is now risen and manifested as the Son of God. Or, to put this into a general principle, we could say that faith accepts as a sign, in the sacramental understanding of that word, what is an emotional stumbling block and a rational absurdity. And what greater absurdity than the notion that twelve men should go out and lead the whole world to a change of heart?

For this seeing of the risen Christ was not a once and for all event in the lives of the apostles. It was not some sort of spiritual capital on which they had to live for the rest of their lives; it was the talent which had to be multiplied. It was a starting point, the beginning of a journey. As the Lord himself showed on the way to Emmaus, the resurrection was the event which demanded that each reinterpret his own personal history and the whole history of the Jewish people. The risen Christ stands as the new title at the head of the book of humanity; he is the only one who re-capitulates it. The history of the people of God and the personal history of the Son of God made man are no longer only history, or folk-lore, or biography; they have become a *semeion*, a sign manifesting the powerful presence of the ever-active God. The words of man are shown to be the Word of God. Christ is the key by which men can now decipher the language of event and word in history, and see in it not the incomprehensible workings of blind fate, or the cruel sport of the gods, but the merciful and loving design of God. This reinterpretation of history in the light of Christ is, on a personal level, the conversion of heart which is the essential prerequisite to entering upon a new life in Christ through baptism. In practice it means allowing Christ to evaluate our lives, refusing to judge ourselves or others, and more deeply a tranquil acceptance of the mystery of my own individuality in Christ, and of the inviolability of God's secret workings in the hearts of all men.

It is remarkable that in the New Testament there is no trace of self-reproach on the part of the apostles. They do not bemoan their

obtuseness and desertion of Christ. Their slowness of heart is stated as a fact, and that statement is entirely devoid of the sort of regret which is rooted rather in disappointment with self than in sorrow at having failed another. The magnitude of the good news precludes any of this self-centred beating of the breast. There is no unhealthy striving to live down the past; for all that, with its good and bad, has become part of the greater mystery of the Redeemer. The apostles learnt with Peter to accept themselves, not on the basis of a favourable self-evaluation, but simply because they knew that Christ accepted them. The pledge of that acceptance was the gift of his Spirit, and in that gift they had to accept themselves wholly as gift.

All this has its source in one basic fact. The apostolic preaching is not a statement about what happened to someone else. The apostles were not simply telling the story of what happened to Jesus of Nazareth. They were bearing witness to what had happened to them, and to what was happening to humanity in Christ. With the resurrection of Christ a new age had begun, history had taken a new turning and mankind had entered upon 'these last days'. The death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit were a single movement into which the whole of humanity had been caught up. That movement marked the end of the beginning, and was itself the beginning of a new end which would be a perpetual beginning in the eternal newness of God.

There is much more in this than what would today be called 'emotional involvement'. The reactions of the apostles to the resurrection were certainly emotional, but they did not remain on an emotional level. The emotional spontaneity of a Magdalen was not crushed but rather tempered and canalized towards the community. The emotional upheaval of Peter, which might easily have led to the despair of a Judas, was given a surer grounding than his own reactions to his situation. The focus of attention was not the reflection of their own emotions, but the risen Lord who stood before them taking them out of themselves. What had happened to him was happening to them, and must happen to them. His death was not just his own personal concern; it was part and parcel of their own daily existence, being killed as they were all day long for his sake. His resurrection was not simply the personal achievement of Christ; it was their own experience as the Spirit filled them with a universal hope and charity. Their faith grew and matured as they learnt to accept and live out the scandal of their own sufferings and of the

incredulity of the jews and see in them a sign of resurrection, just as they saw in the death of Christ the triumph of God. Christ's being raised on the cross was, as St John's gospel emphasizes, his glorification cast in another dimension.

Paul certainly felt the death of Christ at work in his own life. When he speaks he is not communicating a vicarious experience, something which happened to Jesus Christ. It is the here and now of his present life to which he appeals. In the opposition he meets, in his sufferings of one sort or another, in the charity and fervour of his christians, in their hospitality, forgiveness, industriousness, in all this he sees again the death and resurrection of Christ recast through the Spirit of the risen One into the mould of the lives of those who belong to Christ. In the christian community, in the lives of those who are hidden with Christ in God, Paul touches again the same reality of the risen Lord who said, 'Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?' For it is the same undivided Christ who died and rose again, and whether he manifests himself in suffering or in joy, in apostolic success or failure, it is all one as long as Christ is being proclaimed. One can say that for Paul it matters not one whit how Christ is proclaimed. What matters is that he is being proclaimed.¹ But such proclamation depends ultimately on having the same mind which was in Christ Jesus.

For let us make no mistake about it, Paul's ability to recognize the risen One in his own and the community's sufferings and triumphs depended on the objective fact of the death and resurrection of Christ. Had Christ not risen then faith would have indeed been an empty thing, an emotional mirage. Paul's own experience of being a chosen vessel of the Lord was the source of his recognition of the intimate personal relationship of each of his christians with Christ. Each belonged to Christ, but Christ is not divided. Paul knew that he belonged to the community because he belonged to the Lord. His life in the community was the expression of this personal belonging, as he communicated the richness of his own spiritual experience to the Church.

There is here an order of priorities which cannot be neglected. So often today christians look to the community of the Church to make them feel that they belong to Christ; and thence can come great disappointment and bitterness. Indeed the very people who decry using religion as an emotional crutch, and who have little

¹ Cf Phil 1, 18.

patience, understanding, or tolerance for what they brand as mere devotionism, so often revert through their intolerance to the very position which they reject. They seek in religion some sort of hot-house of warm, human relationships which make them feel that God cares and that 'Christ is people'. This is an inversion of the message of christianity. Christ was certainly 'people' for Paul. But Christ was people because, first of all, he was the unique Christ who had seized hold of Paul. Paul was aware of being seized, of belonging to Christ not because others accepted him but because Christ did.

Indeed the whole meaning of being caught up in the grasp of the risen One is that in each individual the whole community is once again seized by the Lord. The Spirit of the risen One is universal, filling the earth, and as he touches the individual he permeates the whole of humanity. The work of the Spirit is to encourage and strengthen, and those who are touched by the Spirit and moved by him are called to participate in his work. Hence the individual will find his strength in the measure in which he seeks to strengthen; he will find his encouragement in the measure in which he learns to bear others' burdens and enter into the universality of the spirit of Christ. This does not mean an end to discouragement and disappointment, but it does provide the necessary ballast to weather the inevitable storms. Even Paul needed a little prod from the Lord at Corinth when he was on the point of giving up,¹ and he had to learn like all of us that the ultimate yardstick by which apostolic success or failure is measured is the death and resurrection of Christ. For that is the measure which excludes triumphalism in all its forms, whether it be blatant complacency, or one of the forms of the *spiritualité d'échec*, which likes to sit gloomily in the ruins of the old house whilst the foundations of the new are being built next door. Paul continued to act and believe as if the Lord cared for everybody especially when he met with the cold shoulder rather than the warm human relationship. That is precisely why he was a christian, because he kept on loving when there seemed to be no personal future in it for himself.

In an age which likes to talk of interdependence and community in the same breath as insecurity and personal fulfilment, we have to be careful not to get our priorities reversed. God is not a means of reassuring oneself; and the religion of Christ can never be used

¹ Cf Acts 18, 9-11.

as a means of personal fulfilment. God remains the God who is love, the creator of true human persons, and the unique source of the hope and faith and love of the community; but none of us have the right to use him for our own ends, no matter how pious they may seem to be. The religion of Christ is not a spiritual meal-ticket, nor is it a way of shoring up personal insecurity. What christianity does is to lead man to live with his insecurities without being crippled by them. For what ultimately destroys man as a human being is not some spiritual, intellectual, or physical deformity, but his own reactions to his limitations. Persecution can never destroy, the persecution complex can. Inferiority of any sort need never lessen a man, but an inferiority complex will. Faced with our limitations and defects, we have to get back to the basic christian experience of seeing the Lord, of learning again to recognize the risen One in the crucified. We have each of us to learn to accept the various stumbling blocks and absurdities of our characters and situations as a *semeion*: a sign, not of defeat nor of the absence of the Lord, but of his powerful presence.

Herein lies our progressive maturing into the fulness of Christ, a maturing which is in practice our dying and rising with Christ. The spirit will inevitably lead us to demand less and less that the Lord bolster us up by tangible signs of his love and care for us. But this is only the beginning. If we are to attain our full growth in Christ we must be prepared to see the Lord in and through situations and people who seem to be signs of his absence. In all this the hallmark of any genuine spiritual experience will always be the same; it will lead us to give ourselves more and more to the community of the faithful and through them to mankind, in loving and compassionate service. The Lord appeared to his own because they had doubted and lost heart, but perhaps he would have preferred them to look into that empty tomb and with hearts full of joy still proclaim – I have seen the Lord.