

# HEARERS AND DOERS

By JOHN COVENTRY

**W**HAT IS IT to believe in the Word? Previous articles in this number will already have shown that the Word of God is more than information, whether written or spoken, more even than saving and revealing information, sent through the hands of a messenger. Already in Israel the Word of God entered into human history and fashioned it, and in the incarnation of the Word, the last Adam, God made it plain that human history was his own. Consequently, to accept this creative Word must always be more than a matter of 'message received and understood'.

In the Old Testament, faith is already a hallmark of religion, and Abraham is claimed by Paul as the type and father of all who believe.<sup>1</sup> But such faith is almost wholly a matter of what we would now call hope; confidence that God will fulfil, in the people's historical future here on earth, what he has promised. Such, too, is our Lady's faith, praised by Elizabeth.<sup>2</sup> But the Word made flesh, and man's recognition of him for who he is, introduces the totally new dimension of christian faith. We have to see, as the apostles had to see, that in Christ we are confronted by God. Christian faith begins when our eyes are opened by the Spirit,<sup>3</sup> when with Thomas we fall on our knees and say, 'My Lord and my God'. John tells us himself that his purpose in writing his gospel was that we might learn to believe,<sup>4</sup> and this is one of the major themes running through it: many saw only materially, and remained blind; only those really saw who saw spiritually, and believed. The christian acknowledgement in faith is a recognition of God, and not merely the recognition of truths, doctrines. For Christ is not just God's definitive messenger; he is also God's definitive message, his last Word, after which there can, from the nature of the case, be nothing more to say. And we can only really begin to understand the message when we see Christ for who he is, in his place in God-made history, in himself and not only in what he is reported as saying and doing, and in his continuing life in his body the Church.

<sup>1</sup> Rom 4, 11; Gal 3, 6-14.

<sup>2</sup> Lk 1, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 20, 31.

It is for this reason that 'believing the Word', the response of faith to which God calls us, must be a response and engagement of the whole man as he exists in social and historical fact, and not merely of, for example, his mental powers. It must be a response to all that we mean by the Word of God, when this Word takes flesh in human history. This total commitment is well brought out by the Council, in the dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, when it defines faith:

The obedience of faith must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God, offering 'the full submission of intellect to God who reveals' (Vatican I), and freely assenting to the truth revealed by him.<sup>1</sup>

In the opening words the Council is quoting the Epistle to the Romans,<sup>2</sup> and it is characteristic of the New Testament that it speaks of faith as obedience. In both greek and latin the word for obey is a compound of the word for hear: the faith of christians engendered by the apostles comes from hearing the preaching of the gospel; but to believe is more than to hear, it is to heed. If God is encountered and confronted in his Word, then our response must involve submission, nothing less than worship, a total receptivity and gift of self. Hence for John to believe is to come to Christ,<sup>3</sup> to love him.<sup>4</sup>

Obedience, however, has for us a rather restricted sense, and so we need to realize that the obedience of faith, involving as it does the fullness of response to the summoning and inviting Person of God made man, means far more than understanding instructions and carrying them out. If the Word of God must to some extent be conveyed to us, or must be expressed to our intellectual nature, in terms of doctrines and resulting guides for conduct, christian belief is always more than notional assent to the former and compliance with the latter. This would be a static and largely unfruitful faith. But the Word of God is a liberating and creative force, ever drawing us out of ourselves to grow in stature and increasingly to transcend the flesh in the spirit. Christ is truth and light and life, and 'the truth will make you free'.<sup>5</sup> In the New Testament such 'freedom' is always liberation from the slaveries into which we are born: liberation from ignorance; liberation from pettiness of vision and

<sup>1</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 16, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 5, 40.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 8, 42; 14, 15-28; 16, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 8, 32.

sensibility; liberation from the flesh into the realm of the spirit. Paul goes down on his knees to the Father to pray

that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.<sup>1</sup>

Thus no limits are set to the possibilities of christian growth in faith, a growth which is a liberation from the smallness in which we begin. Faith is a life force, that of its inner nature demands to grow and fructify, and to create new forms of being and life. The modern and paradoxical plea for a 'religionless christianity', though often somewhat strident and unbalanced in its expression, certainly has a point to make. It is the danger of institutionalized christianity that it has found expression in forms and patterns (and this precisely is 'religion' as seen from the outside) – a danger perhaps more threatening to catholicism than to protestantism – that the very forms that we need to start us in life, and to nourish us, should become a set pattern with which we are thereafter content. If so, what started our growth will in its turn restrict or even prevent it altogether. And if life's experience grows and develops, as it should and almost inevitably does, while 'religion' remains the same, then religion will clearly become progressively divorced from human experience.

It is against such artificiality of religion or stultification of growth that the often heard pleas of 'sincerity' and of 'authenticity' are made. But both concepts need some examination, if we are not to be led astray by them.

In scripture and in common parlance sincerity is opposed to hypocrisy. Failure to live up to and to carry out fully our ideals, and being in this ordinary sense hearers but not doers of the Word,<sup>2</sup> is something of which we are all guilty, and which we would not regard by itself as insincerity or hypocrisy, at any rate as long as we know our own weakness and do not try to cover it up. But we can cover it up from ourselves, and this is the beginning of hypocrisy. The point of James's epistle is not merely to exhort christians to do

<sup>1</sup> Eph 3, 16-19.

<sup>2</sup> Jas, 1, 22.

what they are already deeply aware of as needing to be done, but to insist that they have not really believed at all unless they are trying to put their faith into practice. Faith without its works is not really faith at all, it is dead.<sup>1</sup> We would say it is meaningless. For meaning is not simply something we have inside us, which we might or might not express. We only really discover and create our meaning by expressing it, as may be seen from all forms of artistic and creative activity. A man only finds himself, only creates himself, in his activity. And therefore we would all agree that it is insincere and hypocritical to say we believe, or to say we love, and not to be prepared to do anything about it. The fact is, we do not believe, and we do not love; we are simply assuming a part, that is not ourselves, if we say we do. And this playing of a part is the hallmark of insincerity. Indeed, the greeks used the word *hypocrites* for an actor on the stage. One can only love or believe (and we have tried to show that they are basically the same) with the heart. Our Lord castigated the pharisees and scribes in words of the Old Testament: 'You hypocrites'! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said: This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me'.<sup>2</sup> But more than this is involved in the sincerity of faith.

The sincerity which scripture demands implies not only readiness to respond, but also clarity of vision. Our Lord taught that a certain child-likeness was necessary, if we were to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is to the receptivity and clarity of vision of a child that our attention is being directed. The hypocrite in scripture is the formalist, clinging to 'religion', who appears to act for God, and wishes to cut the figure of a man devoted to God's interests, but is in truth ministering to his own self-esteem. It is this of which the child is innocent, and consequently his eye is brighter and sees more truly. He knows nothing as yet of the conventions of society, religious or secular, and has no use for them: he is more receptive of what is truly there in front of him, because he has not yet built up patterns of assimilation, those patterns that so readily tend to ossify and to docket unwelcome discoveries safely out of the way.

Faith needs this childlike simplicity or uncomplicatedness, and in two passages lying side by side, St Peter attests the Christ-given tradition of linking faith to the clear vision of a child:

Having *purified* your souls by your *obedience* to the truth for a *sincere* ['unhypocritical' in the greek] love of the brethren,

<sup>1</sup> Jas 2, 17.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 15, 7.

love one another earnestly from the heart. You have been *born anew* not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the *living abiding word of God* . . . So put away all malice and all guile and *insincerity* and envy and all slander. Like *new-born babes*, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may *grow up to salvation*.<sup>1</sup>

Sincerity is not enough, if by sincerity is only meant being faithful to what I see and understand. The pharisees, who opposed and rejected Christ, were that. But it is precisely of blindness and darkness of vision that St John accuses them. Christ was the Light of the World and they were all darkness, and could not recognize the light. The man born blind not only recovered his material vision, but learned to believe;<sup>2</sup> his gaining of sight is but a sign of the birth in him of faith, of seeing spiritually. The sin of the pharisees was that they thought they could see, whereas they remained blind:

Jesus said, For judgement I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, that those who see may become blind. Some of the pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, Are we also blind? Jesus said to them, If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, We see, your guilt remains.<sup>3</sup>

Their failure is also called hardness of heart. In other words, their hearts were closed against further growth: there is no suggestion that they were, in the ordinary sense, wicked men; on the contrary, they were zealous 'religious' men. But they were both self-satisfied and proud of their position – unlike a child. They were self-blinded.

From the beginning of the preaching of the gospel there is a demand, both by John the Baptist and by our Lord himself, for conversion, change of heart, a turning away from sin. It is not only sin in the more crude sense that clogs the vision and prevents a man seeing spiritually, and so coming to faith in Christ: this is also brought about by clinging to one's relative darkness and smallness; by asserting before God that we are men, not children, and refusing to grow to new life in the light of his creative Word. Hence sincerity never ceases to be a demand of christian faith. We cannot say, when we have a true faith, 'Now I see'. There always remains a reciprocal process between faith and our effort to respond to it with the heart,

<sup>1</sup> 1 Pet 1, 22; 2, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 9, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 9, 39-41.

in action, in 'works'. For, as we have seen, our very self-expression in action opens to us new meanings, a clearer vision and a brighter light, calling for a fuller response. 'He who *does* what is true comes to the light'.<sup>1</sup>

If the plea for sincerity can mislead us, by leaving us closed in on a 'given' self and can thus verge towards its own hypocrisy, so too in its own way the plea for authenticity can mislead us.

The word arises from a background of thought that realizes the extent to which we can be simply creatures of fashion, the product of our roots and upbringing and environment, without our taking very much hand in the matter ourselves. Not that we are able, or should try, to shed these and become something rootless and unformed, absolutely created by ourselves out of nothing. If I am a European, with only so much of this kind of intelligence, imagination and sense of humour, with an easy-going rather than a tense or nervous disposition and so on, I must realize that I cannot change these elements in my makeup, nor ought I to try to do so. Neither can I suddenly, nor necessarily do I need to, change the social allegiances, the skills and spheres of understanding, that I have acquired and possess here and now. But the plea is, first, that I should 'be' what I am, instead of merely 'having' these characteristics almost unconsciously, in order that my actions should be produced by me, and not by the matrix of society to which I happen to belong. I should first of all take possession of myself – with sincerity. And then I should size up my values and attitudes, and judge them for myself, so that to the extent that I continue with them they are henceforth more truly mine: I have engaged myself in them. And then, even if I cannot greatly change my outward circumstances, I will take firm charge of the way I grow in thought and assessment, and consequently in action. It is only in this way that I can become truly free in a spiritual sense, become a person, authentic.

While one may readily admit the valid insight that such a way of thinking manifests into the nature and growth of personality, it is at the same time not difficult to catch from it a whiff of the classical pagan virtue, self-sufficiency: a certain priggishness and self-satisfaction. 'I wrap myself in my own virtue', Horace wrote. Personality and freedom are so much the catchwords of modern thinking that we need to take a long, long look at some of their

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 3, 21; and see also I Jn 1, 5-10.

associates and expressions. A reasonable search for authenticity could not suppose that personal values could simply be created out of nothing. We live in history and in society, and can only create our lives out of the stuff they provide. And a personality can only be such in relation to society, not apart from it in some sort of severed isolation. For it is precisely developed modern society that has produced the ideal and the possibility of mature personality, by contrast with a more tribal stage of society in which the individual is to a large extent merged, and considers himself as merged, in the group. Even apart, then, from christian considerations, an over-strident emphasis on authenticity could lead to a turned-in and narcissistic ideal of personality, that would be self-stultifying. There will always be the temptation to suppose that my values and attitudes will be slightly superior to those of society, if they are slightly different and 'just mine'; or even to canonize 'being different' and make it an end in itself, thereby abandoning any objectivity in values, and even personal relationships. Selfhood for its own sake is the inversion of personality, and a fairly good definition of hell.

We have thought already that *believing* in the Word is not just a matter of accepting ready-made truths and values; rather, that it is only by the whole gift of self in action that the Word of God can be possessed; and that this very fullness of response will itself lead on to deeper insight. In this context of authenticity and personality, we need also to reflect that it is the Word of God to which we are trying to respond in full faith, and further that this Word is made flesh.

Just as in human society it is precisely the maturing of society that produces the mature human person, with the result that one cannot be a person in isolation but only in society, so in the Church. It is the very visible, historical, structured and maturing Church that brings to me and confronts me with the creative and liberating Word of God, which brings about my growth as a human person. Because it is the Word of God, it creates personality in me. And this consists in a personal relationship with the Persons of the Trinity. This is what makes me to be a person. Hence I can only be, and grow, as a person in the Church.

It is common in our day to speak of the two dimensions of the Church, horizontal and vertical. The former corresponds to the whole biblical truth that the Word progressively, and then definitively, became flesh and is manifested in the world and made available in the visible and human society of the Church, the body

of Christ. The latter corresponds to the truth that the kingdom of Christ exists in its perfection here and now in heaven, not in the earthly Church, which is the place where the Word of God reaches me only to carry me up and make me a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, and hence a christian person. The vivifying and creative Spirit reaches me through the visible Church: by the power of the Spirit I am gathered or drawn 'upwards' through Christ to the Father. Christian authenticity, then, is a response to the expanding demands of the Spirit, and this response progressively creates the christian person as a son of the Father. Such authenticity is no introverted or self-enclosing affair: it opens increasingly outwards, in love, to absorption into the life of Father, Son and Spirit.

One may put the same truth about 'authentic' response to the Word of God in more biblical language. We are born in the 'flesh', a biblical term which does not merely designate our material and bodily nature, but represents our weakness and mortality and alienation from God. And it is through this flesh which he assumed that the Word of God comes to us: that is, through the ordinary human life of the Church, with all its weakness and inadequacies. If we receive him in faith, if we hear and heed, then a new life in the Spirit is born in us, even while we are still in the flesh. The Word of God does not leave us imprisoned in and circumscribed by the flesh, but liberates our spirit progressively with the gift of his own Spirit. This will be our true and authentic growth. Like new born babes, we stretch out for the pure spiritual milk, that by it we may grow up to salvation.