THE WRATH OF THE LAMB

By JOHN ASHTON

IN A RECENT BROADCAST on medieval christian iconography,[1] Mr Geoffrey Webb discussed the extraordinary change in feeling and theological import that took place over two centuries in the portrayal, on cathedral tympana, of Christ enthroned in majesty. At one extreme stands 'the tympanum of Moissac, carved about 1100, which shows a Christ contorted with anger, the symbolic beasts of the Apocalypse poised to spring, and the twenty-four elders before the throne looking up, their fingers stilled at their harps, frozen with fear'. At the other extreme is the Portail Royal at Chartres, where Christ 'is a figure of great benevolence, calm and welcoming. The beasts of the Apocalypse have become affectionate pets . . . The calm of Chartres recalls the classic Christs of antiquity'. In fact there is as wide a gulf between the stern, almost threatening Christ of Daphni and the gracious Pantacrator of Cefalú as there is between Moissac and Chartres, and as much difference in mood and tone within the byzantine tradition in general as in what we think of, too vaguely, as 'the middle ages'. Mr Webb's hypothesis of a permanent tension within the idea of the incarnation, 'resulting from the fact that the central figure of christianity is one who is both divine and human' is, of course, inadmissible, but the evidence of some sort of internal rhythm is too strong to be ignored.

Modern religious art oscillates between the cloying sweet and the distant dry. On the one hand, the wholly lamentable iconography of the Sacred Heart portrays an essentially passive Christ, who suffers but does not act. On the other hand, the strange, modern, abstract Christs appear generally remote and unconcerned. In the search for a stronger figure, one theme common to both byzantine and medieval art has not yet been re-established; the theme of Christ as judge. Moissac and Daphni may seem to us aberrant, but a healthier strand of the same tradition realized that the judgment of Christ could at the same time be a blessing. Any reconsideration of the wrath of God, of the harsher aspects of Christ's message, may

[1] *The Listener*, (June 22, 1967), p 822.

begin from Moissac but must conclude at Chartres. Is it possible to reconcile the two?

Jesus' anger

We may start by observing that the occasional glimpses the gospels afford us of Jesus' anger do not materially affect our first impression of quiet strength. St Luke, more than the other evangelists, insists on Jesus' gentleness, his extraordinary kindness, but the rather stern, authoritative figure in Matthew and Mark (so well captured in byzantine art) wins our ready allegiance also. His uncompromizing rejection of all hypocrisy, his sudden anger with the temple-vendors, his harsh denunciation of Corozain and Bethsaida, these are scenes which, with a little adjustment, can be made to accord tolerably well with our general picture. Like Jesus' first hearers we feel a certain awe, but he remains to us, as to the children of long ago, far more accessible than any of the great prophets, including John the Baptist, who preceded him and foretold his coming.

But his steady affirmation of an approaching judgment, his frequent vivid descriptions of Gehenna, all that in his preaching testifies to the unseen and terrible presence of the wrath of God – this is another matter. Here is something more than an occasional flash of anger, something more than a fixed abhorrence of hypocrisy. None of the prophets, not even Jeremiah, had spoken with such finality and explicitness of the wrath to come. Again and again, Jesus returns to the theme of hell, and although we may not have too much difficulty in demythologizing the worm and the fire and the gnashing of teeth, the little word 'never' stubbornly resists all attempts to remove its sting: 'And they will depart into eternal punishment' – such a sentence cannot readily be demythologized without losing its entire meaning. Even John the Baptist's presentation of 'him who is to come' has a startlingly harsh ring to our ears: 'his winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire'.[1]

Paradoxically, the message of Jesus, in whom we acknowledge the living presence of the merciful love of God, was, on his own admission, more demanding and more uncompromizing than that of the sternest of the prophets. And just as the sermon on the mount

[1] Mt 3, 12.

outlines a more exacting moral code than any previously known to man, so the threat of eternal punishment, tirelessly reiterated, is something radically new. Sure as we are of the central message of mercy and forgiveness, how can we resolve this startling and unpalatable paradox?

Hell

Hell has gone out of fashion, and in many ways this is a good thing. The obvious relish with which the jesuit retreat-giver in *The Portrait of the Artist* set about terrifying the Clongowes schoolboys was no doubt exaggerated, and his brilliant sermon largely the product of Joyce's own imagination, but the genre certainly existed and fed on its own flames. The shuddering horror it was calculated to provoke in the minds of the young was all the more harmful for being permanently and inseparably riveted to their religion. Fortunately, the idea of a supernatural dungeon constructed for the chastizement of those who incur the divine displeasure has nearly disappeared, but it has been replaced by the scarcely less unsatisfactory picture of a punishment wing with rows of private cells in each of which the occupant deliberately shuts himself off from God, to remain immured for ever in his own selfishness. The sinner, not God, holds the key to the cell, but in his pride and obstinacy he will never use it.

This more sophisticated concept insists that hell is not a place where one is sent, but where one chooses to go. The punishment not merely fits the crime, as in Dante's *Inferno*, it is its natural consequence, the ripples in the pool into which a stone has been cast, a sanction imposed not from without but from within the reactive, ordered system of the universe. Yet this stark vision of a personal hygienic hell fails to explain how man's feeble villainies can have such awful consequences. How can the human will, which in life, as all our experience confirms, is essentially free and unfixed, be set and locked irreversibly in death? How can finite wickedness merit eternal misery?

An explanation according to which man brings his punishment upon himself may be more accurate than one which pictures hell as the instrument of God's wrath, but, closely considered, it is even more scandalous and shocking; and as long as hell is thought of as a natural phenomenon, part of the pattern of the created universe, the scandal and shock must remain. Only within a supernatural context can the idea of hell be reconciled with our knowl-

edge of God's merciful love. Man could not know the awful consequences of his own iniquity unless Jesus Christ had come to tell him. But *the wrath of God is revealed by Christ as something from which he has come to save us:* 'Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come'.[1]

St Paul

At the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans, the earliest attempt of a christian thinker to set out in detail God's plan for mankind, St Paul draws up a terrible indictment of human wickedness. Nasty, brutish, wretched and doomed to death: such was the condition of life in the pagan world before the coming of Christ. The use of a dark setting to emphasize the brilliance of the light that dispels it is characteristic of Paul (like Caravaggio or Rembrandt) but we must remember that for him the darkness is measured by the light and not the other way round. Man could not know the depth of his misery without the revelation of Christ. And since this misery is itself a manifestation of the wrath of God, it follows that the wrath too is discernable only in the light of the gospel. Mankind first turned away from God, and as a consequence was allowed to sink deeper and deeper into vice and degradation. At the coming of Christ, this consequence is revealed as a divine judgment.

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth . . . Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the creator . . . For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions . . . And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.[2]

There is no room here for any distinction between personal and impersonal judgment. Certainly the wretched condition described by Paul is the result of man's own actions, but it is at the same time a sentence imposed by God.

However, the sentence is not final: indeed, it is seen as a divine judgment only in so far as it is accompanied by a proffered pardon. Although it is Christ who reveals the depth and extent of man's sin,

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[1] 1 Thess 1, 10. [2] Rom 1, 18–28.

he is not the instrument of God's wrath but of his justice. The message of the gospel is not condemnation but salvation. At the same time, it is true, 'the wrath of God is revealed from heaven', the time of God's forbearance, in which he 'passed over former sins'[1] is over, and man is confronted with the real meaning of his sin, that it must end in death.[2] Nevertheless, the justice of God is for our good, and Paul, having set the stage as it were, for the entry of Christ, concludes with words that breathe hope and mercy:

> But now the justice of God has been manifested through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe . . . Since all have sinned (all) are justified by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus . . . This was to show God's justice, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins: it was to prove at the present time that he is just and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.[3]

It does not occur to St Paul to oppose God's wrath and his love. On the contrary, he finds nothing odd in setting wrath and love side by side: 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since then we are justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God'.[4] Once again, it is clear that the wrath of God is something from which we are saved, or, more precisely, from which we *shall* be saved through faith. Here is fulfilled the central revelation of the Old Testament, that God wills, not the death of the wicked, 'but that the wicked turn from his ways and live'.[5] So now, asserts Paul, in one of the most mysterious phrases in the bible, 'God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all'.[6]

Gospels

The condition upon which we are offered salvation is repentance, and repentance, in the gospels and Acts, involved turning to Jesus Christ, the instrument of God's justice and also of his judgment: 'The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in justice by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead'.[7] This text suggests that the judgment is still to come,

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1 Rom 3, 26. 2 Cf Rom 1, 32. 3 Rom 3, 21–26. 4 Rom 5, 8–9.
5 Ezek 33, 11. 6 Rom 11, 32. 7 Acts 17, 29–30.

and this idea of a future judgment is indeed characteristic of the earliest strands of the christian kerygma, particularly the great eschatological discourses of the synoptic gospels. But as time went on, it was gradually borne in upon the christian consciousness that God's judgment on the world had already, in all its essentials, been effected by the coming of Christ. The 'day of Yahweh' foretold by the prophets had already arrived, and all the doubts about God's final judgment upon the world resolved: 'For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you . . . was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him'.[1]

This assurance finds expression even in the synoptic gospels in their account of the death of Christ, which is accompanied by phenomena associated with the 'day of Yahweh'. But St John goes a step further. Whereas in the synoptics the trial of Jesus is still attended by a *prophecy* of the coming of the Son of Man in judgment, for St John the trial *is* quite precisely the judgment of the world upon itself. Indeed, St John portrays the whole of the public life of Jesus as a continuous trial, in which his condemnation recoils upon his judges, who thereby expose themselves to the wrath of God: 'For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil':[2] 'He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him'.[3]

The trial of Jesus reaches its culmination at the judgment-seat of Pilate, the Lithostratos, where, according to many modern exegetes, Pilate 'made Jesus sit',[4] thus equivalently appointing Christ his judge. Those who reject Christ and, with Pilate, send him off to be crucified are really condemning themselves and inviting upon themselves the wrath of God.

For St John, then, the wrath of God is no longer 'the wrath to come', or at least not primarily so, but, like the gift of eternal life with which it is contrasted, is 'realized', brought down to earth to rest upon those who refuse belief in Christ. Yet Christ himself

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[1] 2 Cor 1, 19–20. [2] Jn 3, 17–19. [3] Jn 3, 36. [4] Jn 19, 13.

pronounces not a single word of condemnation; he insists that he judges no one.[1] His whole life, and his death in particular, is a continuous call for repentance, an offer of forgiveness. If this is refused, the wrath of God must take its effect: 'how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation'?[2] Thus the wrath of God is not 'averted', still less 'allayed', but remains in constant attendance upon man's sin, even though the real will of God, definitively expressed in Christ's life and teaching, is for 'all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'.[3]

Apocalypse

If we turn now for a moment to the Apocalypse, dominated, like so many great churches (think of the dome of San Vitalis at Ravenna) by the elaborate centre-piece of the court of heaven, we find another symbol of the wrath of God, the lamb. The bizarre expression 'the wrath of the Lamb' occurs after the opening of the sixth seal, and it must be observed that the chapter division here does not correspond to the literary structure. Between the opening of the sixth and the seventh seals a single literary unit spans the immense gulf between Moissac and Chartres we have already remarked on. The ceremonious entry of the saints of God, twelve thousand from each of the tribes of Israel, is preceded by the image of the great ones of the earth cowering away in terror from God, 'calling to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?'[4]

If this concluded the scene we should be justified in halting at Moissac without moving on to Chartres, but in fact, after the triumphal roll-call of the saints, the face of God (previously a thing of terror) and the Lamb of God (hitherto a figure of wrath) take on a new aspect: 'He who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence . . . For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water'.[5]

How can the Lamb and 'the face of him who is seated upon the throne' be at once objects of fear and of comfort and trust? How can the judgment seat of God inspire both confidence and dismay?

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[1] Jn 8, 15. [2] Heb 2, 3. [3] 1 Tim 2, 4. [4] Apoc 6, 16–17.
[5] Apoc 7, 15–17.

The answer is in a sense obvious enough: those who have accepted the message of Christ need have no fear: the *essential* quality of the Lamb is gentleness and only by the boldest of paradoxes can he be said to be wrathful.

Crucifixion

But there is a more precise answer available. The saints, those protected by the presence of God, are those whose robes have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. This means first and foremost the martyrs, those who have themselves shed their blood for Christ, but the most important point to notice here is the constant reference to the passion of Christ implied by the figure of the Lamb. For the lamb, symbol, as we have seen, of both wrath and protection, is throughout the Apocalypse 'the Lamb that was slain'.[1] That is to say, in the Apocalypse as elsewhere in the New Testament, the focal point of the divine judgment is the crucifixion, the clearest evidence both of the sinfulness of man and of the mercy of God.

We have seen that for St Paul the wrath of God remained hidden until Christ came to bring salvation. The sufferings of Christ were the uttermost proof of God's love and the means of our redemption. For St John too the cross signifies expiation; if, despite the love of God, it remains a sign of contradiction, this is because it symbolizes not only God's offer of salvation, but also man's rejection of his offer, a sign, not just that God loves us, but that he respects our freedom even to the extent of allowing men to condemn his Son to death. The crucifixion, according to the profound theology of St John, is both the judgment of the world and the source of the union of mankind with God: 'Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself'.[2]

In the Portail de la Calende at Rouen, as Mr Webb pointed out in the talk already quoted, we have an example of precisely this insight exhibited in christian art:

> Instead of Christ on his throne, this tympanum shows us Christ on the cross, with a vast, moving throng all about him, reflecting grief and compassion. As a judgment scene it is perhaps more psychologically (and, one might add, theologically) subtle and profound than any of the others

[1] Apoc 5, 6, 9, 12; 13, 8. [2] Jn 12, 31–32.

> we have been considering, since the judgment here is not a decree imposed on man by God so much as a judgment that man imposes on himself, through his own personal awareness of responsibility when confronted by this sacrifice made for his benefit.

Similarly it was a profound instinct for the central mystery of the faith that prompted St Ignatius, at the end of the first week of the Exercises, and specifically at the end of the meditation on hell, to set the retreatant before the crucifix. Here is the measure of Christ's love: 'It was in all earnest that I loved you', he is recorded as saying to Angela of Foligno. At the foot of the cross, the exercitant makes that condemnation of sin from which Christ himself refrains. This is the point of the First Week. Sin calls forth a judgment, a condemnation, the wrath of God, but it is now the exercitant himself who condemns his own sin and simultaneously begs for forgiveness. Lifted up on the cross, Christ draws the repentant sinner to himself. The wrath of God is averted by the very act in which it is most clearly revealed. This is the mystery of our salvation, which is exclusively and unreservedly a mystery of love. That we can reject this love means that the wrath of God endures, not as a threat, but as a proof of the extent of our freedom and of the earnestness of the redemption. The cross proves that man is capable of utter wickedness, but also that he is capable, in Christ, of loving both God and mankind completely and unreservedly. Finally, it proves that in Jesus Christ God has definitively decided not to condemn but to save all men and to make it possible for them to live in his love.

Conclusion

Are there any examples, within the gospels, of the working of the wrath of God? Yes, several, but perhaps the one that most clearly exhibits the inner dialectic of this wrath is the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal's misery, the direct consequence of his sin, is already, although he is not yet aware of this, the effect of the wrath of God. His remorse and his clear apprehension of his own wretchedness are the wrath revealed, and it is characteristic that this apprehension should be followed immediately by the impulse to return to his father's house. 'My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves

whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights'.[1] In this axiom from the Book of Proverbs is revealed God's motive in allowing the sinner to feel the results of his sin. For although misery and remorse show God's anger at work, and therefore already constitute a judgment, this judgment is not final but is ordered to repentance, to the 'return' in the sense in which the word was used by the prophets: 'Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken and he will bind us up'.[2] When the prodigal does return his father's glad welcome prompts an even deeper sense of his own unworthiness: here again the wrath of God is at work, not opposed to but accompanying his mercy, which is the real revelation of his mind and heart.

In the sacrament of penance the same dialectic is constantly in operation: a wrath whose first effects are painful and bitter, but which is the true commencement of an inner peace. The judgment of God is felt first in the misery of the state of sin, then in the sorrow and contrition that show God's wrath operating within his mercy, and finally, overwhelmingly, in the assurance of pardon received through the sacrament itself. The sentence pronounced by the priest, the absolution, is no mere juridical acquittal, a 'not guilty' conceding that the penitent was already justified in the eyes of God. Rather it is a judgment of mercy and forgiveness that is only possible because the sinner has already pleaded guilty and accused and condemned himself, thus opening the door to the grace that justifies him, that is, enables him to do as God asks, to give God his due.

Once forgiven and assured of God's pardon, the penitent forgets his fear. The effects of the wrath of God are swallowed up in his love. 'In this is love perfected with us that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love'.[3]

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[1] Prov 3, 11–12. [2] Hos 6, 1. [3] 1 Jn 4, 17–18.