THE MYSTERY OF SALVATION

By SISTER MARGARET OF JESUS

THE WORD MYSTERY has in our english language two distinct and etymologically unrelated meanings, the one commonly attributed to it in theological and catechetical usage, the other archaic yet peculiarly relevant to the theme of this article. In medieval England the people of our larger cities – Wakefield, Chester, York – were regaled, usually on the feast of Corpus Christi, with a popular entertainment in the form of a cycle of plays, dealing with the history of mankind from creation to parousia, and known as mystery plays. They were called mystery plays not because they were difficult to understand – the least educated enjoyed their simplicity and their often boisterous humour; nor because they were 'tales of mystery and detection' – their theme was biblical, and everyone knew from the beginning how the story would end. They were called mystery plays because they were produced and acted, if not actually written, by members of the trade guilds of the city – the butchers and bakers and candle-stick-makers: each guild being given an episode in the great narrative to develop, so that the shipwrights might act out the story of Noah, and the bakers the feeding of the five thousand or the last supper. And a man's trade, his craft, the thing he did with his hands, was called his mystery; indeed the word (of doubtful etymology, but maybe connected with the latin *ministerium*) is still used today in certain official and traditional formulas: 'the ancient craft and mystery of . . .' A man's mystery was what he did with his hands, his proper craft.

In this sense of the word it is exact to speak of the mystery of salvation. For salvation is what God does: we call the history of his dealings with men the history of salvation, and indeed from the beginning of this great story to the end there is question of nothing else. 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and out of the house of your slavery' . . . 'and you must name his name Jesus (Saviour)'. Salvation is indeed the proper craft of God: not an ancillary occupation, but that which he does, that which he is for fallen man, so that the title of Saviour is synonymous

with the mysterious name of God. 'I am Yahweh your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour'.[1] He is uniquely Saviour: 'Am I not Yahweh? There is no other God besides me, a God of integrity and a Saviour'.[2] 'Yes, I am Yahweh, your God since the days in the land of Egypt: you know no God but me, there is no other Saviour'.[3] He is eternally Saviour: 'No God was formed before me, nor will be after me. I, I am Yahweh, there is no other Saviour but me'.[4]

And if God is essentially Saviour, if salvation is the self-expression of God in encounter with the misery of the world of sin, then we shall not be surprised to find in the event of salvation that quality of infinity which is characteristic of all that God does. If in the event of salvation God makes himself known to us, then the event of salvation will surely be a mystery in the other sense of the word. To be involved in the event of salvation will not be a transparent experience; all God's ways surpass us, and although we know that he saves us, we do not understand how. We are saved in faith and in hope.

The long history of God's dealings with mankind witnesses strongly to the element of mystery in this process of salvation. All those who are caught up, more or less closely, in the saving event find it a strange and bewildering experience. Mystery meets us at every turn. Abraham was called to leave his father and his father's home, and in return was promised possession of a land. In fact, all that he owned of this land at the moment of his death was 'six feet of earth' – a tomb for himself and his wife. Yet the whole history of salvation rests on the promises made to Abraham. In that great image of salvation which is the exodus event, the note of mystery is even stronger. It is present at its inception, in the mysterious attack of death which was the tenth plague. It cannot be seen simply as an attack on the forces of evil in the person of Pharaoh and his men; its attack was universal, so that the hebrews were protected from it only by the blood of the lamb. What part is death to play in this salvation event? Carried through the waters of the Red Sea by the saving power of Yahweh, God's people are in principle saved:

> Yahweh I sing: he has covered himself in glory,
> horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.
> Yahweh is my strength, my song,
> he is my salvation.[5]

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[1] Isai 43, 3. [2] Isai 45, 21. [3] Hos 13, 4. [4] Isai 43, 10–11.
[5] Exod 15, 1–2.

Yet this is only the beginning for them of an experience which is full of mystery. And the bewilderment of men involved in this strange and unique sufferance of salvation finds utterance in scripture through the incessant questioning, the bewildered 'why' which springs repeatedly to the lips of men confronted with the saving act of God.

> Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in the land of Egypt, when we were able to sit down to meat and eat to our heart's content?[1]
> Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Was it so that I should die of thirst, my children and my cattle?[2]
> Why did you bring the assembly of Israel into this wilderness, only to let us die here, ourselves and our cattle? Why did you lead us out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place? It is a place unfit for sowing, it has no figs, no vines, no pomegranates, and there is not even water to drink.[3]
> Why did you brings us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness? There is neither bread nor water here; we are sick of this unsatisfying food.[4]
> Then all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron and the whole community said: Why does Yahweh bring us to this land, only to have us fall by the sword, and our wives and young children seized as booty? Should we not do better to go back to Egypt?[5]

All too often we sweep these 'whys' aside as proof of a rebellious and complaining spirit. It is not only the common people, however, but the chosen friends of God, who are impelled to question by the mysterious pressures of God's saving action.

> Why do you treat your servant so badly, says Moses, Why have I not found favour with you, so that you load on me the weight of all this nation? Was it I that conceived all this people, was it I that gave them birth, that you should say to me: Carry them in your bosom, like a nurse with a baby at the breast, to the land that I swore to give their fathers. I am not able to carry this nation along by myself alone: the weight is too much for me. If this is how you want to deal with me, I would rather you killed me . . .[6]

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[1] Exod 16, 3. [2] Exod 17, 3. [3] Num 20, 4–5. [4] Num 21, 5.
[5] Num 14, 2–3. [6] Num 11, 11–15.

This is no complaining spirit, but a cry wrung from Moses by the experience of being, under God, the saviour of his people. Moses died within sight of the Promised Land; and Josue takes up the lament. 'Alas, Lord Yahweh, why did you bring this nation across the Jordan only to deliver us into the power of the amorite and destroy us? I wish we had won a place to live on the other side of the Jordan'.[1] And Gideon in his turn finds the experience of leading the people of God in this fantastic adventure of salvation a bewildering one. 'The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: Yahweh is with you, you valiant warrior. Gideon answered: Forgive me, my Lord, but if Yahweh is with us, why is it that all this is happening to us'?[2]

'If Yahweh is with me, why is all this happening to me'? Failure and disaster seem inextricably woven into the holy history of God's dealings with men. The people of God, established after a long and bitter struggle in the Promised Land, were to hold it with some degree of stability only for a very brief period, the hey-day of the kingdom under David and Solomon. To David's house God promised an eternal kingship, but his son Solomon was no sooner dead than the kingdom was in schism, and before long his line had disappeared. Yet, once again, the whole future of salvation rests upon the promises made to David. And worse was still to come; the total disaster of the exile seemed the final annulment of all Israel's hopes. In retrospect we can see God at work saving his people even in the very exile itself. We can see this remnant of God's people, deprived of the majesty and splendour of the temple cult, growing to a truer insight into the nature of worship. We can see them becoming a scriptural people, as they gather round their sacred writings – the only tangible relic of their past that they had been able to carry with them into exile, and in their sabbath reunions meditate, assimilate and re-express the significance of their own history as the mysterious working out of God's plan among men. Both their faith and their hope are purified, as they learn to rely exclusively, in the absence of all human hope, on the promises of God and on his mercy which is extended to the poor in spirit. All this we can see in retrospect; but nothing of this was apparent to those who were undergoing this strange and incomprehensible experience of God's saving power. 'If Yahweh is with me, why is it that all this is happening to me'? The writer of Deuteronomy

[1] Jos 7, 7. [2] Jg 6, 12–13.

tried to rationalize this experience, to see it simply as the consequence of the constant infidelity of the people of God. In passage after passage he describes with realism and eloquence the rigours of the exile, in a *simpliste* context of retributory justice:

> For not obeying the voice of Yahweh your God, just as Yahweh took delight in giving you prosperity and increase, so now he will take delight in bringing you ruin and destruction. You will be torn from the land which you are entering to make your own. Yahweh will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; there you will serve other gods of wood and of stone that neither you nor your fathers have known. Among these nations there will be no repose for you, no rest for the sole of your foot; Yahweh will give you a quaking heart, weary eyes, halting breath. Your life from the outset will be a burden to you; night and day you will go in fear, uncertain of your life. In the morning you will say: How I wish it were evening! and in the evening: How I wish it were morning! such terror will grip your heart, such sights your eyes will see. Yahweh will take you back to Egypt by sea and by land, though I had promised you: You will not see it again.[1]

True, the deepest insights of the author of these lines go beyond this explicit rationalization of events. He has so profound a faith in the love of Yahweh for his people that he can yet believe in an over-riding purpose of salvation. The God whose picture emerges from the Book of Deuteronomy read as a whole is not a God of vengeance but a God of love: he sends suffering only that his people may be brought back to him again; and his justice is finally seen as nothing other than the unswerving purpose of his mercy. Nevertheless, 'Yahweh will take you back to Egypt by sea and by land'; the sacred writer sees the exile period itself as a kind of temporary suspension of God's saving action, an interlude in his plan, a temporary rejection until such time as his people will have learned wisdom in suffering, and will have returned to him. The author of Deuteronomy is himself too involved in this experience of salvation to see it as salvation, too involved to realize that in fact at no time in its history save the time of that first terrible passage through the desert had Israel been so close to its God. And

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[1] Deut 28, 63–68.

it is during the exile that Israel receives, in the prophecy of the deutero-Isaiah, its first great prophetical insight into redemptive suffering. In the obscure figure of the suffering Servant the mystery of salvation is expressed as never before; and never again until the coming of Christ will it be so profoundly stated.

True, during the intervening centuries the meditations of Israel take up the intellectual challenge presented by the suffering of the innocent. On the lips of Job the familiar question recurs: why?

> Why did I not die new-born?
> not perish as I left the womb? . . .
> Why make the gift of light to a man who does
> not see his way,
> whom God baulks at every side?[1]

And the Book of Wisdom attacks uncompromisingly the traditional belief that poverty, suffering, sterility and an early death are the punishments of sin. The virtuous man can be poor; blessed is the barren woman who is blameless, the eunuch who has committed no crime. Better to have no children yet to love virtue; the virtuous man, though he die before his time, shall find rest. But the musings of Job and of the Book of Wisdom are beside the point. The real problem is not the presence of suffering in the world, nor even the suffering of the innocent; for both belong to the context of a world at odds with its creator. The real problem is how suffering can be redemptive; the real mystery is that salvation is accomplished only in and through pain.

And this mystery grows not clearer but deeper as the saving action of God intensifies to its climax. The music that accompanies the advent of the Saviour is not only the carolling of angel choirs, but also the weeping of women bewailing their children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more. A sword will pierce the heart of the mother of the Saviour, as she learns gradually in her own life-experience what it means to be closely associated with the event of salvation. Mary could well have made her own the words of Gideon: 'If Yahweh is with me, why is it that all this is happening to me'? save that on her lips the reproach strikes a more personal note: 'My child, why have you done this to us'? Reading between the lines of the gospel, we can see how Mary walked in faith through the obscurities of God's saving action, keeping these

[1] Job 3, 11; 3, 23.

things in her heart, pondering their significance, following her Son to the ultimate bewilderment of Calvary. We sense the confusion of the apostles, too, as the Saviour who is sent departs more and more from the stereotype in their minds; they did not know what they were asking when they made their ambition the first places in the kingdom. Disconcerting were the demands made upon them: to forgive till seventy times seven times, to love their enemies, to take up their cross daily. Disconcerting were the words and the actions of Christ: the imprudence with which he ran counter to the most powerful religious influences of his times, the folly which made him persist in going up to Jerusalem when all that awaited him there, most evidently, was treachery and an enmity which hounds to death. None of this looked or sounded to the apostles like salvation. All this we can sense and almost measure. What is immeasurable, what we hesitate to probe, is what it meant exactly to Christ himself to be involved, as no one had yet been involved, in this mystery of salvation. In his experience the 'why' which reverberates through the whole history of God's dealing with men receives not an answer but a reinforcement, an accent of greater urgency, a final utterance in the last despairing cry of Christ upon the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me'?

The mystery of salvation is epitomized in the cross of Christ: 'to the jews an obstacle that they cannot get over, to the pagans madness'.[1] The apostles, in the first fervour of the pentecostal revelation, preached the resurrection of Christ and the communication of the Spirit, in which salvation is made manifest to men. But no degree of insight into the glory of the risen Christ can minimize the stark reality that his return to the Father, his entry into glory, had been through the agony of a violent death and the moral annihilation of failure and rejection. Had they been tempted to overlook this, their own experience would have sufficed to recall it to their minds. St Paul, who preached that 'if Christ be not risen, our faith is vain', learned what it meant to be associated with the event of salvation. 'God has put his apostles at the end of his parade, with men sentenced to death. Here we are, fools for the sake of Christ . . . we have no power . . . we are nobodies. To this day we go without food and drink and clothes; we are beaten and have no homes'.[2] For the mystery of salvation is not a mystery which we contemplate from without, but a mystery in which we

[1] 1 Cor 1, 23. [2] 1 Cor 4, 9–11.

are involved; Paul is conscious of carrying in his body the death of Jesus.[1] To see in the crucified Christ the power and the wisdom of God is only possible to 'those who have been called': for the very element of mystery in this saving act means that it is only accessible to faith. 'The language of the cross may be illogical to those who are not on the way to salvation, but those of us who are on the way see it as God's power to save'.[2]

The mystery of salvation is epitomized in the cross of Christ. This mystery men have tried to speak to themselves throughout the history of the Church, seeking for formulas to express something of that which is ultimately hidden in the mystery of God himself. The history of this search is the history of the development of the doctrine of redemption. The search is a fruitful one, for every insight is a grace; but no formula can embrace the whole of this reality, and every formula can betray. In our own century, theology is particularly rich in its insights into this mystery of salvation. Our return to the biblical sources of this revelation has reminded us that salvation is essentially a question, not of a commercial transaction or of a satisfying of justice, but of a restoration of personal relationships. We can see that its motive power is not outraged justice, but merciful love: God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son. We can see that though the cross emphasizes the element of mystery in the saving act of God, and in a sense sums up that mystery, yet the saving act itself embraces the incarnation, the resurrection, the ascension and the sending of the Spirit. We can see that for Christ just to be man in this context of sin, in which we are all involved, would necessarily imply suffering and death. For just to be the love of God in person, present among men, is to receive in person the great refusal which through the ages has been man's ever-recurring answer to the loving initiative of God. The cross is the expression of this refusal. We can see that to pass through death in a movement of love and obedience, in perfect union with the Father, is to pass into glory. We can see that the death inflicted by sinners has become a death for sinners, and that the cross is at once defeat and victory. We can see that our hope in the cross of Christ 'is not deceptive, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the holy Spirit which has been given us'.[3] All this we can see: but we cannot see how. To use one final and very simple image: those who teach small children often use,

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[1] Cf 2 Cor 4, 10. [2] 1 Cor 1, 18. [3] Rom 5, 5.

to convey the idea of salvation, the image of a drowning man. The mystery of salvation is that Christ did not jump in and pull us out; he jumped in and drowned with us, that by drowning we might find life.

And the mystery is not one which we contemplate only from without, but one in which we are involved. 'Lord', said St Teresa of Avila, 'if this is how you treat your friends, what wonder that you have so few'! This was her own serenely whimsical version of Gideon's 'If Yahweh is with me, why is it that all this is happening to me'? This is a lived experience in the lives of us all: and it is an experience which we live too as a community. To be one of the people of God engaged in this adventure of salvation is by no means always an exhilarating experience. There are times when failure, confusion and bewilderment predominate, and the saving action of God in the Church is more than habitually obscured. In these times the Church could indeed say: 'If Yahweh is with me, why is it that all this is happening to me'? And we look at the Church, and think how much more effective an instrument of salvation she would be if she were the Church of our dreams rather than the Church which God in his wisdom allows her to be. And we look at the world, in which we long to discern the saving action of God, and we see nothing but confusion and disintegration. The mystery of salvation may well mean that in this very disintegration lies concealed the action of God's saving power. One contemporary writer perceives it so: and his words can serve as the final comment on the unfathomable way in which the divine mystery of salvation, the proper craft of God, is accomplished in our midst.

> The centre (of the christian revelation) was not 'man knowing himself in a meaningful world', but man dissolved in death, reduced to the death that forever gave the lie to the human myth of a friendly and humanly meaningful world out there. The world is not a stage but a process in which man is engulfed and lost, and this humanly unbearable truth is the place of God's coming to us in the risen Christ . . . And thus it is that man today, just because he is going 'into solution', just because he is losing the meaning he once had, just because the *monumenta* of the christian world seem to him irrelevant, just because he no longer knows who he is, he is potentially nearer to the heart of the christian thing than ever before.[1]

[1] Moore, Dom Sebastian, *God is a New Language* (London, 1967), p 57.