

THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD

By THOMAS E CLARKE

‘I have come that they may have life,
and have it more abundantly’.¹

CONTRAST THIS declaration, sheer arrogance on the lips of any man save one, with the near blasphemous, ‘Thou hast conquered, O pale galilean, and the world has grown grey with thy breath’ of the poet, and you have the basic misunderstanding which keeps countless men from accepting the gospel, and deprives countless christians from really finding in the gospel a rich human life. By and large, men form their judgment as to whether Jesus Christ is an invitation or threat to living humanly less by evaluating his sayings than by observing his followers. This is a lived hermeneutic, whose norms and procedures differ notably from those in which gospel texts are critically interpreted.

Yet if the lives of christians fail to manifest the living Christ, Son of the living God and source of the life-giving Spirit, it is largely because they themselves have insufficiently appreciated that the God manifested and bestowed on them in Jesus Christ is not a God of the dead but of the living. To read the New Testament, and especially the johannine writings, from this perspective, is to see the christian vocation not as an inhibiting message from a nervous God, but as a compelling invitation to be, to be human, to be oneself.

The living Father and his Son

The entire mission and character of Jesus Christ may be summed up in Peter’s confession, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’.² This text finds a certain parallel in the fourth gospel, where again it is Peter who says, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life, and we have come to believe and to know that you are the Christ, the Son of God’.³ The mission of

¹ Jn 10, 10.

² Mt 16, 16.

³ Jn 6, 69 ff. The preferred reading, however, is ‘You are the holy one of God’.

Jesus, his very person, is to be the manifestation of God among men, and of God precisely as the living God; that is, as the God who, in contrast to the idols, is source of that unity, wholeness and vitality which make a man really alive. God lives his manifestation of himself precisely as Son; that is, as the one to whom the Father has communicated in all its fulness this character of being the source of life. He is, therefore, as he is called in an early discourse of Peter, *archēgos tēs zōēs*;¹ or, as the paschal sequence calls him, *dux vitae* leader unto life for all who believe. He is this effectively, of course, inasmuch as he is source, with the Father, of the life-giving Spirit, the divine gift which he bestows on the Church to be her Spirit, her life.

What may be missed, however, by a too exclusive concentration on the life-giving role of the glorified Jesus, is the contribution of his earthly life, his ministry of word and work, in manifesting (and therefore in communicating) to men that God their Father is the source of life and not of death. The indispensable condition of this manifestation of the living God by his Son is that the Son's own life should be manifestly a rich, human life, that filial piety should not flourish at the cost of human maturity. It is this theme of mature sonship or filial adulthood which is the most striking aspect of the gospel portrait of Jesus as Son of the living God.

While other portions of the New Testament witness to Jesus under this aspect, it is principally in the johannine writings that the theme can best be pursued. The motif of life is central in the fourth gospel, and prominent in the first epistle of John. From these two writings, in fact, it is possible to construct a synthesis of the entire economy of salvation centreing on the theme of divine life manifested and communicated to men in Christ. We will confine the present development to the fourth gospel.

The Father gives life to the Son

Though John does not use the expression, 'the living God', he does present Jesus as speaking of 'the living Father' in referring to him who sent him.² And it is characteristic of that Father to 'have life in himself',³ and therefore to 'awaken the dead and bring them to life'.⁴ For the fourth gospel, then, the Father is pre-eminently living and life-giving. We must, however, keep in mind that 'living'

¹ Acts 3, 15.

² Jn 6, 57.

³ Jn 5, 26.

⁴ Jn 5, 21.

and 'life-giving', in the functional understanding of God that is characteristic of the New Testament, even of John, come to the same thing. God is living inasmuch as he gives life.

It is the Son himself who is the primary beneficiary of the life which the Father communicates. One of the most beautiful aspects of the relationship of Son and Father in the fourth gospel is that the Son has all from the Father, and the Father gives his all to the Son. 'As the Father has life in himself, so has he given to the Son to have life in himself'.¹ The commandment (*entolē*) of the Father represents everlasting life, for the Son as well as for mankind.² Sometimes in the lives of the saints we encounter dark periods, when God appears to them to be imposing, without sympathy, an almost unbearable yoke. Nothing of this appears in the fourth gospel in the relation of Jesus to his Father. Never does the Father emerge for him as anything but the source of life. This is true even of the *entolē* that the Father has given him. It is a source of life, not of limitation. To do the will of him who sent him, to accomplish his work, is the very food on which Jesus lives.³ He speaks always as the beloved Son with whom the Father has shared absolutely all. 'All that is thine is mine'.⁴ He does call upon the Father to save him in his hour of greatest anguish, or at least wrestles with the question of whether he shall do so. But his stance remains one of confidence, of desire that the Father's name be glorified.⁵ There is not the slightest suggestion of alienation.

All life from the Son

Since living and life-giving are inseparable in God, for Jesus to have from the Father the Father's own life is for him to be constituted as source of life for others. He is the bread of God which has come down from heaven to give life to the world.⁶ His words are spirit and life.⁷ He has come that men may have life more abundantly.⁸ In fact, he is simply life itself,⁹ the resurrection and the life.¹⁰ And so the mission of Jesus is not merely to manifest to men that their true life comes to them from the Father, but to be the bearer of that life in his very person. It is not the Father alone but the Father and the Son together who give life. 'For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son also gives life to whom he will'.¹¹

¹ Jn 5, 26.

² Jn 12, 50.

³ Jn 4, 34.

⁴ Jn 17, 10.

⁵ Jn 12, 27 ff.

⁶ Jn 6, 33.

⁷ Jn 6, 63.

⁸ Jn 10, 10.

⁹ Jn 14, 6.

¹⁰ Jn 11, 25.

¹¹ Jn 5, 21.

And though Father and Son are distinct, their giving of life to men is identical. Just as he who sees the Son sees the Father,¹ so the Son's giving life to the dead, whether in miraculous sign, as in the raising of Lazarus, or in the forgiveness of sins, is the Father's life-giving action. 'The Father has been at work until now, and I am at work'.² This work is to communicate divine life.

The Spirit of life

Nowhere is the unity of Father and Son in communicating life to men more manifest than in their joint giving of the Spirit. As giver of life, God will not remain purely extrinsic to men, but will become a life-giving fount of life within the human heart. Men must be born again of the Spirit,³ if they are truly to be made sons of God.⁴ Now this life-giving Spirit is sent by Father and Son together.⁵ So much is he the Spirit of Father and Son that his coming is in reality their coming.⁶ Once Jesus has been glorified, the believer will be refreshed from the 'streams of living water', the gift of the Spirit, communicated to them from the heart of Christ.⁷ In this way the promise of Jesus to share his life with his disciples will be verified. 'I live, and you shall live'.⁸

It is clear, then, that the prospect that Jesus Christ holds out to his followers is life and not death. Just as his perfectly filial relationship with the Father was not a craven submission to an alien yoke, but a joyful inward and lived acceptance of a fatherly *entolē* which is life,⁹ so the acceptance of the life-giving Spirit as gift of Father and Son represents not an abdication of human freedom but its fulfilment. This acceptance, for the fourth gospel, is faith. It is true that faith is sheer, unmerited gift, for 'No one can come to me unless the Father who has sent me draw him'.¹⁰ And there are times when its acceptance or rejection almost appears to be a matter of sheer predestination, with no basis of distinction within the freedom of man himself; as, for example, when the evangelist says that the enemies of Jesus 'could not believe'.¹¹ But the statement a few verses later,¹² that many, even among the rulers, did believe (though not openly), indicates that the evangelist is not espousing a predestinarian thesis, but that, in rather imperfect semitic fashion (making use of the famous 'hardening of hearts' motif of Isaiah), he is insisting

¹ Jn 14, 10.

² Jn 5, 17.

³ Jn 3, 5-8.

⁴ Jn 1, 14.

⁵ Jn 14, 17; 14, 26; 15, 26; 16, 7.

⁶ Jn 14, 23.

⁷ Jn 7, 38 ff.

⁸ Jn 14, 19.

⁹ Jn 12, 50.

¹⁰ Jn 6, 44.

¹¹ Jn 12, 39.

¹² Jn 12, 42.

that man's resistance to God's plan of salvation does not escape or frustrate that plan. In addition, implicit in the whole ministry of Jesus, in his solicitation of men's faith in himself and in the message he brings from the Father, is the freedom of man to accept or reject him and his message. This freedom, in fact, accounts for the note of poignancy in the fourth gospel's summary of the ministry of Jesus,¹ in the scenes with Peter and Judas at the last supper, and in much of the last discourse and priestly prayer to his Father.

Life through death

But why, it may be asked, should men want to refuse the gift of life? What accounts for the mysterious and sometimes terrifying opposition that Jesus encounters in his mission? The answer of the fourth gospel is dualistic, in the sense of conceiving the drama of salvation as a struggle between two powerful forces, both of them personal, but expressed in the image of a struggle between light and darkness.² But just how, in refusing to believe, are men refusing the light, and why should they love the darkness? There may be a partial clue in the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus. The true life of man is beyond the power of flesh and blood.³ Man has to transcend himself in order to fulfil himself. The pattern of Jesus' own life is normative for any man who would enter into true life. The grain of wheat must die, if it is to bear fruit. The man who loves his life will lose it, and the man who hates his life, insofar as it is merely of this world, thereby achieves life that is everlasting.⁴

So there is an apparent alienation in the call of Jesus, at least in the eyes of the man without faith, the man who is unwilling to risk life for the sake of life. Something of the same exigency is discernible in the eucharistic discourse. We find it hard to see how people, some of them already his disciples, who had previously expressed their yearning for the bread of heaven, should now turn away and walk no more with him.⁵ The reason may well be that faith in the life-giving power of Jesus' own flesh and blood called, paradoxically, for a transcending of the power of flesh and blood. 'It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing'.⁶ The sacramentalism of the fourth gospel thus contains an ambivalent stance regarding human, fleshly reality. It has been made worthy to be the vehicle of salvation; yet of itself it is without profit for salvation. Though John

¹ Jn 12, 44-50.

² Jn 1, 5; 12, 35, 12, 46.

³ Jn 3, 5-8.

⁴ Jn 12, 25 ff.

⁵ Jn 6, 67.

⁶ Jn 6, 64.

knows nothing of the later technical distinctions of natural and supernatural, this contrast of flesh and spirit is surely an anticipation of subsequent reflections and development.

In summary, then, the fourth gospel contains the message that faith is the key to genuine human life. Drawn by the Father, hearing the words of Jesus, receiving from them both their Spirit, the believer, willing to venture beyond the limits of mere flesh and blood, undergoes a kind of death, only to find true and never-ending life. In this view, the human career of Jesus, in which total fidelity to the *entolē* of the Father leads inevitably to the exaltation (death and resurrection together) which makes it possible for the Spirit to be given, becomes both the paradigm and the source of the life of the christian. By being itself a human life that is ultimately fulfilling, it manifests that the Father, in obedience to whom it is lived, is the living, that is, life-giving, Father, that he is God of the living, not of the dead.

Mature sonship

This gathering of texts from the fourth gospel could be complemented, not only from the first epistle of John, but from the epistles of Paul; though their accents and terms would very often be different. Instead of prolonging this biblical meditation, however, it may be more profitable to reflect theologically on this theme of Jesus as Son of the living God. We have already spoken of the remarkable combination of filial reverence and adult responsibility which all the gospels disclose in the human countenance of Jesus. Normally, we would not expect a man of adult years who looked constantly to his father for the direction of his life to be an exemplar of mature humanity. Yet we find that this relationship of dependence, far from inhibiting the human responsibility and creativity of Jesus, was its very source and support. He speaks of both dependence on the Father and his own personal initiative almost in the same breath, without the slightest indication that there is even a tension between the two. Immediately after the powerful assertion, 'No one takes (my life) from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again', he adds. 'Such is the command I have received from my Father'.¹ Interiorization of law here touches infinity in its depth and intensity, and one catches a faint glimpse of that realm of infinity where it is the

¹ Jn 10, 18.

very personhood of the Son, within the absolute oneness of the God-head, to be the self-expression of the Father's mind, his eternal *entolē*, so to speak.

Now this occurrence of full human responsibility, creativity, freedom in direct, and not in inverse, proportion to filial dependence on another whom one calls 'father' goes directly against our ordinary experience. As a man grows to adulthood, his dependence on father and mother for his life diminishes. We would look askance at the man of thirty who would still feel the need of checking his important decisions with his parents. The temptation, of course, is to apply the laws of this human relationship univocally to man's relationship with God. The result is, or can be, calamitous. Either one feels compelled, for the sake of leaving room for that element of initiative and struggle which has marked the history of human greatness, to conceive of man's freedom as proportionate to his non-dependence on God. Such a view does honour neither to God nor man. From being the lord of history and the rock of salvation, God becomes, to some degree, at least, a concerned, influential, but ultimately somewhat helpless spectator of the drama which he has initiated by creation, but whose successful conclusion he cannot assure. Man, for his part, is given a false assurance of an autonomy which is not really his, an assurance which, in the vicissitudes of human life as it actually is, can turn to blackest despair in the realization that no one, neither himself nor the benevolent but helpless God who looks on, is capable of assuring the triumph of the Spirit in human life. Or else one falls into the opposite trap of requiring of the man who wishes to be totally dependent on God a stance of diminished initiative and creativity.

Jesus the way to true life

There are definite names, of course, for the theological positions which, in extreme or less extreme ways, have tripped on this classic dilemma. But even when one does not formally espouse one of these positions, he can actually be living it. That is why it is important to return again and again to the gospel portraits of Jesus, particularly the johannine one. For some, reflection on the theological controversies on grace (*de auxiliis*) can be helpful, especially if exposure to the never-ending dialectic of position and counter-position brings home to the student the element of mystery in the basic God-man relationship. But the *de auxiliis* is not for all, and in any case nothing

can compare with the privileged moments of reading the inspired word of God, where the filial maturity of Jesus, which we are invited to share, is offered as the concrete, personal model of living humanly, that is to say, in christian fashion. 'Looking on Jesus, who began our faith and brings it to perfection',¹ becomes the essential work of growth in holiness, that is, in vital assimilation to the spirit of filial maturity which shone forth in Christ Jesus. This work takes place in a kind of contrapuntal movement between prayerful attentiveness to the word of God in scripture and a discerning responsiveness to the invitations of the Spirit of Jesus within the situations of daily life. In this perspective the christian's faith, the root and foundation on which all holiness and apostolate depend, becomes, negatively, the refusal of both quietism and activism; and more positively, it becomes a constantly deeper experience of a life in which free human decision, self-making, creativity, grow inseparably with a deeper sense of personal inadequacy and trust in the power of an all-loving Father to make life flourish from the buried and apparently dead seed.

That such a life brings anguish goes without saying. For the christian eschews the sense of security which can come from a feeling of absolute independence ('I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul'), while he retains the responsibility, sometimes agonizing, of personal decision. Moreover, this kind of christian faith and hope does not look to God for clear and distinct directives in the complex details of a human life. The Father to whom one has committed one's life absolutely remains the invisible Father. The Son, too, is believed, not seen. And there can be no absolute assurance, even after long prayer, that what one takes for the invitation of the Spirit is really that.

Yet if the life of filial maturity plunges the faithful christian into sharing the sufferings of Christ, it remains a life that is intensely joyful. This joy may best be described, perhaps, as the joy of discerned meaning. Once it has been disclosed to a christian that the way to live is to be like Christ Jesus in his total submission to the Father, and that this way brings true freedom, then life takes on the quality both of bold, adventurous decision and of a trusting journey into the unknown in the company of a loved one, *the* loved one. There is something that rings true, that corresponds to the human condition, to the shape of the actual world, in a way of life that involves

¹ Heb 12, 2.

commitment to mystery without the abdication of one's freedom. And because this is undertaken not as the fulfilment of a theory, nor yet as the merely external imitation of an admired hero from the past, but as the essential expression of a lived, personal relationship with the risen Lord, it more than verifies his promises: 'If the Son sets you free, you shall be truly free'.¹ 'He who follows me does not walk in darkness'.² 'If any man thirst, let him come to me.'³ 'If any man eat of this bread, he will live forever'.⁴

¹ Jn 8, 36.

² Jn 8, 12.

³ Jn 7, 37.

⁴ Jn 6, 51.