

THE LIVING GOD

By JAMES QUINN

IN A PHRASE of great beauty, in a context of even greater sadness, God speaks of himself through the lips of Jeremiah as ‘the fountain of living waters’.

Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns,
that can hold no water.¹

It is God alone who can satisfy man’s thirst: he alone is the living God.

As a hart longs for flowing streams,
so longs my soul for thee, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.²

God revealed himself to Israel as the *living* God. He was not the living God simply because he was real. The problem of atheism was not a problem in Israel. Israel’s problem was not whether God existed, but what kind of God men were to serve. Men might act as if God did not exist or as if he did not care how men acted, but foolishness of this kind was not the foolishness of atheism. It was the folly of wilful blindness.

The fool says in his heart,
‘There is no God’.
They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds,
there is none that does good.

The Lord looks down from heaven
upon the children of men,
to see if there are any that act wisely,
that seek after God.

¹ Jer 2, 13; cp 17, 13.

² Ps 41 (42), 2–3.

They have all gone astray, they are all alike corrupt,
 there is none that does good,
 no, not one.¹

The folly of man turns him aside from the path of true wisdom,
 the service of the living God. It may also, as so frequently in Israel,
 turn him towards the service of idols.

Our God is in the heavens;
 he does whatever he pleases.
 Their idols are silver and gold,
 the work of men's hands . . .
 Those who make them are like them;
 so are all who trust in them.²

But Israel's God was not the living God in sheer contrast to lifeless idols. The idolatry ridiculed by the prophets was not the mere service of dumb idols: that is stupidity rather than wickedness. The lifelessness of the idols was the point picked out for mockery, but the real target of the prophets' invective was the corruption that went hand in hand with idol-worship.

Idolatry began as a pre-scientific attempt to control nature. The idol was the 'god of the gaps' of the ancient world. The service of idols was the outward, often ritually sophisticated, expression of a slavery to nature and the forces of nature. The god worshipped by the idolater – not the idol itself – was thought of as having power over nature, as being in fact one of the powers, even the supreme power, in nature. This might be ingenuous enough, but man is rarely content with sheer ingenuousness. Idolatry tended to degenerate into strange pathways of perversion. The attempt to control nature by idol-worship tended to corrupt nature. Only the living God could be served in purity.

In contrast to the idols and the powers they represented, the God of Israel moved in a world wholly beyond the world of nature. He was so utterly above nature that nothing in nature could express his being. The God of Israel was not, however, like the hellenistic gods in their splendid isolation from the world of men: he was the God who cared. Nature was the proof of his caring. Creation came to be by the living power of his word; the face of creation is constantly renewed by his living breath.

¹ Ps 13 (14), 1-3; cp Ps 52 (53), 1-3.

² From Ps 113 (115); cp Ps 134 (135).

When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created;
and thou renewest the face of the ground.¹

In the lovely poem of Jesus ben Sirach in praise of divine wisdom, Wisdom comes to dwell within its own creation.² In the temple liturgy the splendour of nature – its beauty, its terror, its mystery – is seen as a pale reflection of the divine splendour itself.³ But, while he remains wholly in control of nature, the God of Israel is in no way identified with it. He is the personal, living God who transcends nature even in his very concern and care for it.

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?⁴

How did Israel come to know God as the living God? How was Israel able to recognize God as more than a power: not only the greatest power of all but a living person of infinite love and compassion? Obviously, it was God himself who took the initiative here: the living God was not the unaided discovery of Israel. But God revealed himself less by word than by event. He allowed Israel to discover his presence and his person less by direct confrontation and self-disclosure than by Israel's contemplation of her own experience. It was the insight of prayer into the meaning of experience that enabled Israel to know the living God.

The religion of Israel was a religion of history. Israel's history was continually re-lived in the memory of Israel. Past events were pondered, their hidden depths were savoured, the divine plan gradually unfolding itself to the eyes of faith. Each generation re-lived the past as a continuing experience. Over past and present shone the light of a divine promise that would bring history to its perfect fulfilment in the day appointed by God.

God's action in history was the action of a living person: sovereignly free, yet loving and compassionate. The living God was the lord of history, acting and speaking in it but always its undisputed master. When he spoke, his word was creative, purposeful and sure.

¹ Ps 103 (104), 30.

² Sir 24, 1-12.

³ Cp Ps 28 (29).

⁴ Ps 8, 3-4.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
 and return not thither but water the earth,
 making it bring forth and sprout,
 giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
 so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
 it shall not return to me empty,
 but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
 and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.¹

This was the word which promised joy and peace to Israel; which *effected* joy and peace for Israel. God's saving word is his saving activity, his meaningful and loving intervention in history. God's word is himself. God's word not only *reveals* him: through it God *communicates* himself. The word spoken in love reveals not only meaning but the person behind the meaning: it is a gesture of self-giving. The word may be unuttered, spoken, we might say, in silence – a gesture perhaps or a glance – but it has power to reveal the personality hidden from the ear. So God's action, even where it occurs in silence, is never simply the action of a force in nature: it has the translucent quality of a word revealing a mind, a personality.

For while gentle silence enveloped all things,
 and night in its swift course was now half gone,
 thy all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal
 throne,
 into the land that was doomed.²

Prophetic insight helped Israel to hear the word of God, to see the hand of God in history, whether in judgment or in mercy. The prophets were those who spoke to Israel out of an experience of God: Moses as well as the prophets in the more technical sense. Their experience of God was not the experience of religious emotion or of individual 'conversion'. Their experience was for the sake of the whole people: their mission was to speak to Israel as God's holy people and direct their insight towards the divine meaning underlying the course of history.

In using the prophets to interpret the meaning of history God was teaching Israel the lesson of salvation. God's method was to teach through experience, to use experience as the living vehicle of divine truth. Salvation-history unfolded itself before Israel's eyes through

¹ Isai 55, 10-11.

² Wis 18, 14-15.

the contemplation of events. God's catechesis was above all life-centred. History, which after all is life past or present, is not simply an unrelated sequence of brute facts but a pattern of events shot through with divine meaning.

God, as the lord of history, can intervene directly in history, with or without the medium of words. More often he speaks indirectly, allowing the meaning of events to disclose itself to the eyes of faith. So Israel learnt to recognize God as the living God either in the experience of a divine visitation by God in person or, more frequently and more regularly, through the insight by which, under divine inspiration, she was enabled to scrutinize and evaluate the signs of the times.

God's catechesis of Israel was progressive. The art of the teacher respects the capacity of the pupil and his growth in maturity. There was under God's guidance a gradual development in Israel's understanding of the living God. This culminated in the final and perfect catechesis in the person of the supreme prophet, the total revelation, the Word incarnate.

We turn now to consider some of the stages in this growth of understanding on the part of Israel. The sections that follow are arranged in a time sequence that is in fact misleading, for later reflection on past events saw ever deeper meaning in those events. The divine meaning of the events was not always immediately seen in the actual experience of the events. Often, too, there was a progressive insight into the rich, personal meaning of events originally recognized as supernatural but capable of deeper and deeper penetration in the light of later experience and contemplation.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis are a composite structure of earlier and diverse material. This falls into two categories. There is, first, the priestly narrative of creation, in which the focus of interest is on the 'liturgy' of creation.¹ There follows the account of man's² creation and fall, with its subsequent history of sin in the world.

The story of creation reveals God as the sovereign Lord, standing wholly above the forces of nature; as the living God, the author of goodness, the designer of the universe and the loving creator of mankind. The whole world was created to give glory to the living God. The history of man is presented in the light of stories that were current coin in the ancient East. These stories, which grew up as the primitive philosophizings of folklore, were given new meaning

¹ Gen 1, 1-2, 4a.

² Gen 2, 4b-11, 32.

as they were reflected upon by Israel. Israel, God's holy people, saw that underlying these stories – underlying life itself – lay deep truths about God and man. The course of human history, of life and death, of murder and warfare, was seen as something deeply mysterious: human history was the history of universal sin. Sin divides God from man, man from man, nation from nation.

The mystery of universal sin reveals also the mystery of God's love. Man in his helplessness turns constantly to God. He is the living God, having mercy on his sinful creation, awakening the response of sorrow in man's heart. The living God could not be content with a history of mankind that was nothing other than a history of sin. And so he speaks to Abraham in freedom, awaiting a response of freedom. He promises to call into being a people who will serve him in freedom, as living persons responsive to the living God. In the promise made to Abraham the future Israel comes face to face with the living God.¹

The great experience of Israel, the memory that never left her consciousness, was the experience of the Exodus.² As Israel re-lived the Exodus from passover to passover, the supernatural dimension of it revealed itself more and more clearly through repeated contemplation of its meaning. Israel's gratitude to the living God was the creative experience which enabled her to sound its spiritual depths.

Associated with the Exodus experience, indeed its fulfilment, was the experience of the Covenant.³ At first it was the experience of the formation of a people and the giving of a law to seal a treaty between God and Israel. Later, the prophet Hosea, reflecting in prayer on his own tragic experience of marriage, saw in his problem the image of Israel's infidelity to God.⁴ In a flash of divine insight he glimpsed the truth of the real meaning of the Covenant: nothing less than the marriage-covenant between Yahweh and Israel, his bride. A treaty of fidelity is suddenly seen as a living, permanent relationship of love between God and his people. 'I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord'.⁵ The living God is the bridegroom of Israel.

¹ Gen 12, 1-3.

² Cp Pss 77 (78); 104 (105); 105 (106); 113 (114); 134 (135); 135 (136).

³ Exod 19. ⁴ Hos 1, 2-8. ⁵ Hos 2, 19-20.

In the settled monarchy under David and Solomon, Israel was enabled to meditate ever more deeply on the living God. It was in worship that God revealed his living presence to his people. In the service of the sanctuary Israel grew in wisdom through her fidelity to God.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false,
and does not swear deceitfully.
He will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.¹

The peace and security of Jerusalem came to be seen as the image of God's blessing. Jerusalem was the holy city, the dwelling place of the living God, the source of its strength.

So, in a psalm of later date, we read:

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth,
Mount Zion, in the far north,
the city of the great King.
Within her citadels God
has shown himself a sure defence.²

The monarchy under Solomon seemed to have reached a high point of prosperity and religious observance. But piety waned with affluence and power. God had warned Solomon that his blessing was conditional:

But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes which I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them; and the house which I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight; and

¹ Ps 23 (24), 3-6.

² Ps 47 (48), 1-3.

Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins; every one passing by it will be astonished, and will hiss; and they will say, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?' Then they will say, 'Because they forsook the Lord their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt, and laid hold on other gods, and worshipped them and served them; therefore the Lord has brought all this evil upon them'.¹

God's vengeance did overtake Israel. But even in executing judgment the God of Israel is still the living God. God was to use his punishment of Israel as the most important stage in Israel's growth in wisdom. Israel was to learn its hardest, yet most rewarding, lesson through the experience of suffering.

Israel in defeat and exile learnt spiritual maturity. The idolatries of sense, even the idolatries of the worship of the true and living God by outward observance only, had to be broken. The living God had to crush Israel before he could reveal himself fully in the mystery of suffering. The lesson had to be learnt from within, from the very experience of suffering. The exile was not a new revelation; it was a revealing experience. The prophets, themselves involved in suffering, had to interpret the true meaning of suffering to Israel. Suffering was to be the way of salvation.

This was the burden of the songs of the Servant: suffering is God's appointed way of redemption.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him;
 he has put him to grief;
 when he makes himself an offering for sin,
 he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days;
 the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand;
 he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied;
 by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous;
 and he shall bear their iniquities.²

It was in the midst of calamity that Israel received the message of consolation from the living God, the promise of restoration. It is in

¹ 1 Kg 9, 6-9.

² Isai 53, 10-11.

suffering that God reveals himself most powerfully as the living God, the omnipotent one, the source of all consolation. Only the living God can teach the lesson of his love through the paradox of defeat. 'And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put into your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore'.¹

It is in the days of the great prophets that Israel begins to have some awareness of a resurrection of the body. Ezekiel foretold Israel's restoration in the days of the Messiah in terms of a resurrection of the body.

Then he said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel'. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off'.

Therefore prophesy, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people.

And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it', says the Lord.²

Later, in the agony of persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C., we find a mature doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

I do not know [says the mother of the Maccabees] how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.³

¹ Isai 59, 21.

² Ezek 37, 11-14.

³ 2 Macc 7, 22-23.

It was in exile too that Israel came to see her destiny linked with the whole world. Even her bitterest enemies – Egypt, Babylon, Philistia and Tyre – were to become her friends: history was to be undone, and Zion was to be the mother city of the nations.

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
 the Lord loves the gates of Zion
 more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.
 Glorious things are spoken of you,
 O city of God.

Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
 behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia . . .
 The Lord records as he registers the peoples.¹

Israel had thus to pass through all the experiences of human life before she was mature enough to receive the fulness of revelation that came in Christ. Israel had to grow in wisdom through the contemplation of life, and especially through the refining fire of suffering. It was suffering that brought her into closest contact with the living God. Israel came into his living presence when God seemed to have forgotten her. It was in prayer and suffering that Israel was able to enter most fully into the mystery of the living God who is most present when he seems to be most absent.

The prayer of suffering is the prayer of faith and hope and love. It is the prayer of life. All prayer demands purification before there is insight, and insight before there is communion with the living God. The prayer of suffering is the prayer of the christian, as it was the prayer of Christ. Suffering is not only pain of body. It is any crisis in life, great or small, that can make or mar a man, that can make him turn his face away from God or look with renewed understanding and confidence into the face of the living God. Suffering sharpens our awareness of God.

Suffering is the mystery that can open our eyes to that other mystery that lies deeper than man himself can probe: the mystery of the living God at the wounded heart of the world. Suffering reaches its climax in death, the gateway to life, the very school of wisdom. It is a truism to say that God will reveal himself as the living God at the moment of death. But in a profound sense the very experience of death may well teach us more about the living God than any experience that can precede it. Israel had to die in order to be reborn to welcome the living God in the person of his Word.

¹ Ps 87 (86), 1-6.