

THE GRAIN OF WHEAT

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ST JOHN places the teaching of Christ on the death of the grain in the context of the coming of the greeks.¹ We do not know that they met Jesus, but the presence of those gentiles not of the present fold, although seeking out the good shepherd, stands as a reminder that Christ is to lay down his life for *all* his sheep.² Jesus had waited for the appointed hour to lay down his life,³ the life that no-one could take away from him against his will.⁴ Now he recognizes that the hour has come:

The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone: but if it dies, it bears much fruit.⁵

The general meaning of the parable is clear if paradoxical: it concerns death as productive of life. The direct application is to Christ himself, who would draw all men to himself by his crucifixion.⁶ But as John's text goes on to affirm, we too are associated with Christ in the death-life theme: 'He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life'.⁷

The language here, while no longer parabolic, is still paradoxical: anyone who wants to live must die. Jesus had to die in order to give life to others; we, no differently from our Master, must pass through death to that life which he came to give us in abundance.

In our day, the general thrust of psychology is towards self-development, growth as a person. This seems directly to contradict the teaching on the death of the wheat-grain. Of course, anyone who claims to be a christian would agree that the man who thinks he is living life to the full often misses what it is all about: man's false love for himself ends by destroying him. But it is when one goes beyond the rationally defensible that the tension between ordinary human growth and the death of the grain becomes acute.

If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am there shall my servant be also; if anyone serves me the Father will honour him.⁸

¹ Jn 12, 20.

² Jn 10, 26.

³ Jn 2, 4; 7, 30; 8, 20.

⁴ Jn 10, 17-18.

⁵ Jn 12, 23-24; Cf 1 Cor 15, 35ff.

⁶ Jn 12, 32.

⁷ Jn 12, 25; cf Mk 8, 35; Mt 10, 39.

⁸ Jn 12, 26; cf Mk 8, 35.

The inference is clear: the following of Jesus is a call to be ready to sacrifice oneself and to imitate the master in suffering and death. The suffering and death are both the necessary means of following Christ and the result of doing so, although the end-purpose is glory, fruitfulness, eternal life and honour, all in union with him. It would seem to follow, then, that the closest possible approximation to Golgotha is Golgotha, and that if Golgotha or full martyrdom is not available, the substitution of universal pain is the ideal. Clearly one may not trivialize the death of the grain by equiparating it with that self-denial which, by and large, even a naturalistic ethic would endorse. While such an ethic gives the fullest scope to self-development, the very notion of self-development would appear, to say the least, out of keeping with the spirit of the cross. Yet how far is one to go in self-denial? Pressed to its limits, self-denial would surely extend to the field of basic human experiences, such as fulfilment and growth. But on the other hand, where this ideal is accepted, it is easy to predict the resulting psychological damage, whose end-product may well be a distorted human personality, bearing little similarity to Christ beyond a superficial imitation of his suffering. Asceticism at the price of human stultification: self-fulfilment at the price of infidelity to the cross; such is the dilemma with which the christian seems to be confronted in the age of the psychologist.

It may be well at this point to take a closer look at some of the various meanings borne by the word 'asceticism'. Even relatively modern ascetical literature shows that the traditional catholic view places its chief emphasis on moral asceticism: the usual schema divides this into two areas, the negative and the positive. The negative is *metanoia* – the change of heart by which a man turns away from sin and from sinful desire, from the triple concupiscence, from moral evil. The New Testament is full of this theme, and undoubtedly it is fundamental to any real conversion. The crude interpretation of this is to avoid evil: by placing a vigorous emphasis upon self-training – the root meaning of asceticism – performance can be bettered. The problem, however, is that evil acts can be avoided much more readily than the heart can be changed. Anyone who has ever attempted, even in traditional practice, to enter upon this task is aware of its immense difficulty. Furthermore, we are now aware of the complexity and confusion of the underlying reasons for our conduct, at least sufficiently to suspect that our eye may not be as single as we imagine. Nevertheless, the very contradiction of natural inclination implicit in the process is a death.

Positively understood, moral asceticism means the complementary turning towards God and the neighbour in love: it implies more positive acts and attitudes, the progressive correction of inner disorder, the positive attempt to transcend the merely personal spirit in all its selfish assertiveness, and to substitute selfless love in its place.

Another division is cultic asceticism: historically and perhaps essentially, this seeks to purify man, conscious of his sinful state, before he ventures to participate in the sacred mysteries or encounters God. In the wider sense, cultic asceticism is exercised in self-denial or other activities undertaken as penance, reparation, or as the expression of one's will to dedicate oneself to God. In such acts there is the quality of sacrifice, based on the recognition that God is absolute and supreme Lord.

The final division is the mystical, which tends to subserve the growing experience of God and union with him: this involves a progressive purification of the heart, the gaining of inner peace and composure, a standing away from all that one is impelled to think of as one's own, the patient expectation of God's intervention despite darkness and dryness.

All these forms of asceticism are only different aspects of the road to God: they should not be separated, for in fact they interlock and depend one on the other. But it is important to keep in mind that any asceticism, and particularly the cultic, should be exercised in union with Christ and through his one efficacious sacrifice. The death of the grain is apparent only, a matter of merely external actions, unless it occurs in union with Christ's death.

Much of traditional moral asceticism was based on or touched by an unconscious manicheism or dualism. It tended to confuse the spiritualization of man with his dematerialization, a confusion which seems to have come about through a quite erroneous understanding of St Paul's doctrine of the flesh and the spirit (though sound common sense and judgment largely prevented widespread serious damage by invoking the principle of the greater good or the needs of the apostolate). Almost totally it neglected the challenge of the complete integration of all things in man – soul, mind, body, the instinctual, the affective, even the apparently negative drives – whatever gave difficulty tending to be put into the rag-bag of 'fallen nature'. It failed in short to see that integration of the person was itself a major field for the exercise of asceticism. This is not to attribute to the full integration of the person an independent value in a

false sense, but simply to say that sound development as a christian needs appropriate personal maturity: and the most generous exercise of asceticism of whatever sort is also exposed to unsoundness unless the personality is sound. This means that many of the activities and acts of moral asceticism, and certain features of cultic asceticism as well, may in fact not be what they seem and may have little enough to do with christianity or its specific asceticism.

It is the one person who will move towards personal development, whether wrongly or rightly understood, and towards God in the death of the grain. The difficulties arising from both processes are very similar, and in the healthy responses to these difficulties there are strong analogies. There is not perfect correspondence between the processes, but they should not be separated as though by definition they were mutually opposed.

There is little enough theoretical difficulty in the positive love of God and our neighbour, though things become rather different when we try to carry the theory into practice. But when I turn to the negative elements of moral asceticism, I find myself quite sure that to say No to myself on the scale proposed to me would mean that I would no longer be me. Even in the field of positive asceticism, I become aware that in many ways I am in danger of being blotted out as me. In other words, in the proposals which the ascetical tradition lays before me, there is a massive threat to my security. The challenge of the cross tends to be rejected, not because it is unreal, but because it threatens mental defence mechanisms which have been more or less unconsciously adopted to protect my peace of soul, even at the price of illusion. Mental mechanisms defend the ego against the pain of facing reality: they are processes of perceiving, reasoning, judging and acting that serve to bolster the crumbling ego. We cannot but be aware of the problems of relationship, affectivity, values and action in which we are immersed, though we may be quite unaware of the full extent and depth of our conflicts; and the ego cries out for protection. And hence the flight from reality; reality is uncompromising and threatening to me as me. But the flight from reality, and particularly from the truth about myself, is a prime obstacle to personal development even in naturalistic terms. It is infantile to imagine that we are immune from the effects of our evasions, protections, compensations, compromises and escapes. To imagine that personal development is achieved by blind trust in our instinctive drives is itself a form of escape. But if the refusal of self-encounter will tend to plunge me into ever deeper

self-deception, personal development is not automatically produced by merely admitting what I am. To see myself as inadequate, to see through my evasions and self-deceits, to perceive my fears for and of myself, to become aware that my motives may be very different from what I imagined: all this could give a further basis for inadequate patterns of behaviour. In passing, it should be noted that negative moral asceticism and some aspects of the positive can themselves serve as escape mechanisms from the threat of discovering the truth about myself.

Since the christian believes, he has a true relationship to God who shares himself with the believer by grace. But for all its objectivity, and perhaps because of it, this faith-gift of God is sometimes one that we would rather be without, because that, too, is threatening in its consequences. The basic asceticism is the exercise of faith, and the radical asceticism of faith is the death of the grain. Faith is much more than the intellectual assent to theological propositions. It is an obedience, an on-going response to God's sharing himself with us. Faith gives us much, but it is also a renunciation of self. In faith a man accepts the impenetrable mystery of God: he gives himself to God, trusting in a promise he has not seen. He abandons the attempt to make an independent philosophy for his own existence: he no longer tries to make the world after his own image and likeness. His ordinary judgment urges him to pursue self-fulfilment through paths which are at least perceptible and rational; but in faith a man must point himself towards God who transcends everything. A man of faith sees that he may no longer set himself up as his own norm: in pauline terms he is obliged to put to death 'the flesh'. This is hard for man because he has built into him the fundamental inclination to make himself the measure of all things, to find his treasures in here-and-now values, to plot his own course, and to make himself secure in the midst of insecurity. It does not matter that intellectually a man may recognize the inadequacy of his expedients to find security: this is the way he works.

But because of faith and guided by it, a christian is obliged to let go, to put himself into hands that are not his own. He needs to contend with himself, particularly in those areas where he is most drawn to seek an illusory security. The defences which serve to shore up a falsely independent ego have to be broken through. This christian dynamism has close affinities with sound personal development: this too requires an ability to trust others rather than to fend for oneself, this too is a threat to one's security. It has been found

that the possibility of letting oneself go into the hands of God is greater when human trust has been learned. And conversely, inappropriate self-dependence in human relationship seems to militate against openness to God. There are forms of self-dependence which favour self-indulgence; under the disguise of personal development they are no more than a palliative for insecurity.

The asceticism of faith becomes more demanding and painful as experience teaches the believer lessons which hardly seem to be consistent with his faith in a God of love, who has given us power to become his children. He has to learn to accept both himself and others with all the inadequacy, weakness, frustration and sin which characterize human progress through life; and so often these things appear in some way the result of his very effort to live in faith. This is the continuing death of the grain. Eventually it is necessary to accept death itself, which seems to mock the whole business of living, especially its thrust towards self-realization and achievement. But in the face of this contradiction running through life and culminating in the ultimate negation of death, the asceticism of faith demands that we continue willing to live and to serve. Despite any tendency to disgust or to hopelessness in the face of the unmanageable pain of the world, we are impelled by faith to adhere to the fidelity of God, rejecting both the onset of doubt or weakness, and the anodynes of unreality and self-deception which would lessen the pain. It is only a mature human character that can tolerate this sort of tension, and, as we have seen, true self-development will not permit the attractive escape into unreality by the process of ignoring half the picture.

There is nothing sick in acknowledging the pain of the world and personal failure and inadequacy. It is sick only if it turns into self-hatred or self-rejection. Even in our sins we must accept ourselves for what we are, and self-hatred even in the context of sin can often be a mechanism to avoid the painful admission that this is really me. To hate and reject myself as sinner is the equivalent of trying to deny my sin. And similarly it is an illusion to foment a pattern of guilt-feelings, persuading ourselves that this is a 'sense of sin' and a kind of general insurance against the judgment. Guilt-feelings may impel to a strong activism; they may also encourage an indrawn defensiveness as a means of avoiding the pain of further guilt-feelings. Such defensiveness, functioning more against the possibility of failure than that of fault, can serve to block off the possibility of that true personal development which comes from an open and mature encounter with life. And it is only in an encounter with life as enlightened by

faith that the believer can find out what God wants of him as an individual person. In that openness to the neighbour and the world which is characteristic of the developed person, there can be found an attentiveness to God's will and potentially an active and joyful submission to it.

A new initiative is needed when God's will is known. But initiative even in its most natural sense demands asceticism. The obedience of faith can lead us anywhere, but it requires us to be willing and able to go. This sort of availability is of course instinct with risk: a self-validating and automatic moral asceticism may well militate against it. In responding to the will of God there may be inextricably linked both human development and the death of the grain; the promise of life from the death of the grain is not only eschatological.

Neither moral nor mystical asceticism can stand without the asceticism of faith. Where the latter is weak, there is always the danger that asceticism will be brought to focus on man's own 'perfection' rather than upon God. St Ignatius makes the point perfectly:

In everything he does, the one thing he aims at, the one purpose he has in mind, is the greater praise and glory of our Lord God. Everyone must bear in mind that progress in every department of the inner life will be proportionate to the degree in which he gives up self-love, self-seeking and self-interest.⁹

Self-development cannot be the purpose, but it may be a product of the very principle of avoiding selfishness.

But the asceticism of faith would not be specifically christian if it were not founded upon sin and judgment and redemption through the passion of Christ. The sufferings of life, including those of personal growth, confront the christian with sin, whose results they are. He will accept his own sufferings without recrimination, admitting the fact that he is justly under punishment. Of himself he cannot move out of the debtor state. He will see that he needs redemption and is powerless to achieve it; he must look to Christ for his salvation and attend specifically to how Christ worked our salvation by the cross. And the cross is the culmination of the *kenosis* of Christ, which means in concrete terms that he took upon himself the whole of our human condition. He exposed himself defenceless to the sins and malice of men. He accepted them for what they were, accepted that

⁹ *Spiritual Exercises: Reformation of Life in a Given State*, n 169.

they would ruin him and, in any human terms, destroy him. Christ's free acceptance that the malice and weakness of a particular group of men should be unleashed upon himself brought him to the cross and to carrying the sins of all men in his body.¹⁰ From his sufferings he learned obedience.¹¹ He did for us what we could not do for ourselves but what we absolutely needed to have done for us and in us.¹² Yet it is needless to add that there is no sign in Christ of a defective character development; and the full range of affectivity is clearly displayed in his life. Indeed, in the personal human psychology of Christ we may find the ultimate answer to the problem of self-realization as contrasted with the death of the grain. Unless the grain itself is the result of a whole process of maturation, it can hardly die with full fruitfulness.

And therefore all christian asceticism must be a sharing in the asceticism of Christ; and that is, eventually, an asceticism of the cross. But this sharing is not just a kind of material imitation of Christ – and far less an attempt to keep up with the christians as distinct from the Joneses. Rather, it is a conscious and voluntary acceptance of the consequences that follow upon the grace of having been baptized into Christ's death.¹³ It is an assimilation *of* the passion of Christ and not primarily an assimilation *to* the passion: it requires that the christian will take to himself Christ's death each day. It echoes and reflects the inner meaning of the beatitudes and the counsels. Since it is not simply an exercise undertaken for personal improvement, even moral, it operates under the power of the Spirit and by his light.

There is also the directly eschatological dimension. Along with the Church the christian is on pilgrimage; and yet he is already one in the Church with those who have triumphed. His grace is the beginning of his glory; but he has not yet attained what has been promised, and can only do so through actually dying. It is here that the waiting, preparedness and vigilance for the coming of the Lord fit in, together with the necessary attitudes to make these real and effective. The Lord is long a-coming; and it is a strong asceticism in itself to hold out against the weariness of life, dimness of faith and the pervading sense of defeat. The temptation is very similar to that of the drop-out. The christian must remain open and available to God's voice. Hence he must be capable under God of standing away

¹⁰ Cf Phil 2, 7-11; Heb 4, 15; 1 Pet 2, 24.

¹² Col 2, 13-15.

¹¹ Heb 5, 8.

¹³ Rom 6, 13-14.

from defensive attachment to places, activities, plans, and the rest. It will be clear that a continuously personal growth is both a condition and a result of such qualities. The fact is that we are going to die, and therefore must daily be more free of the world. And the paradox returns, for concretely to be free of the world we must use it with all sound spiritual discrimination. But the accent must fall upon the theological, for this is a great help in preventing the egotistic inclination to self-perfection, which would just be a refusal to join in the death of the grain. But to go even further, the theological must be in union with the Church and with Christ its head; which means that all asceticism, even the theological, must look to the service of the Church and the glory of God.

The purpose of christian asceticism is not to achieve self-perfection; but it must not be concluded that self-development is opposed to it. Asceticism must take into full account that it can only work with the totality of man as he truly is. It may not follow the line of cutting off due consideration of the real demands of soul, body and spirit, and of man in his concrete situation: he is one and individual, and he has his place in the Church and in the world. The grace of God speaks to the whole man; and God, by requiring man to share his life through the grace of Christ, opens an almost unknown area of a human development that is deeper and fuller than the naturalistic. As we have insisted, this can only be done in union with Christ's passion and death, and simply demands that one should rise in complete honesty above the trivial and the merely self-gratifying.

Sin and grace work through and in the material world; but while it is perfectly true that the whole of creation is to be graced and brought to unity and balance, it is clear that from the very fact of this desirable unification we are thrust from any form of automatism into a discernment of spirits. Personal growth is not merely a kind of by-product of asceticism; it is both a prerequisite for sound asceticism, and the fruit of it.