

# WHILE WE WERE STILL ENEMIES<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE HOLY YEAR appeal for reconciliation sounds a summons and brings God's healing grace to cure every open and hidden sore of enmity. A practical way to respond to this call is traced clearly in the memorable scene that took place long ago in the London Charterhouse. On 1 February, 1535, when the Act of Supremacy made it high treason to refuse to acknowledge the king 'as the only supreme head of the Church in England', the carthusian prior, St John Houghton, and his confrères gathered in the chapter room to prepare for the martyrdom which now seemed inevitable.

Addressing his spiritual sons, the prior urged them to set all things right with God and with one another. That they might make amends for their offences against the Lord, he recommended sacramental confession, strengthening his counsel with the words, 'Let us not be found unprepared when the Lord knocketh at the door'. His next concern was to remove whatever ill will might still separate brother from brother. He provided for this, saying, 'Having made our confession, on the following day we will be reconciled to each other . . . because without charity neither death nor life profiteth anything'.

From that day of dark foreboding a light shines brightly on the two essential aspects of reconciliation. The heartfelt plea, 'Wash me until I am whiter than snow',<sup>2</sup> utters a need as life-long as our days in this world. If, after a life of holiness, the carthusian martyrs were still concerned about wounds of enmity, their example breathes a spirit that is perennially christian. As long as the Church endures, therefore, she will echo ceaselessly the words of St Paul: 'In Christ's name, we implore you, be reconciled to God!'<sup>3</sup>

## *The sore that festers*

Rudolf Bultmann has often remarked that St Paul's chief interest

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Rom 5, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ps 51, 7.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor 5, 20.

centred on an ingenious spiritual anthropology that would help the christian to understand himself and to lift his eyes to ideals both remedial and fulfilling. Though this lop-sided judgment does not square with the vast dimensions of Paul's vision of God's work in Christ, it does serve to emphasize the apostle's uncanny insight into the shadowed and often tortuous story of man as seared by the effects of a global and personal disaster.

Time and again he reminds his converts of what their life had been before they became christians – 'immersed in this world, without hope and without God'.<sup>4</sup> In the first chapters of his letter to the Romans,<sup>5</sup> he includes everyone in his bleak picture of a Christ-less humanity always at odds with God. His words close with the sombre universal judgment, 'All men alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine splendour'.<sup>6</sup> It mattered little to Paul that some would take offence at this pessimistic appraisal of man without Christ. Should unrealistic optimists carp at his words, Paul would bring them back to earth by reminding them that the human race in its very origin incurred a blight which history has served only to intensify. He affirms this truth with the clairvoyance of faith which admits no camouflage of wishful illusion: 'Sin entered the world through one man, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned'.<sup>7</sup>

This stricture comprehends all the adverse judgments which the prophets of Israel had levelled against the best of men, God's chosen people. Giving voice to Yahweh's sense of rejection and betrayal, the prophecy of Hosea is like a flood of tears that has petrified at intervals. The darkest picture of all is painted by Jeremiah. For him the story of man is nothing but a tattered tale of fits and starts – and dead stops. No matter how many times God made appeal and no matter how steadfast his will to purify and to save, Israel was always the inveterate backslider, a people of 'rebellious and defiant heart'.<sup>8</sup>

Strangely enough, in reading the prophets and in listening to Paul's summary of their judgments on humanity without Christ, one seems to hear resonant echoes even in the world to which Christ has come and in hearts that have already received him. Study Paul's painful description of man torn asunder by his own half-

<sup>4</sup> Eph 2, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Rom 5, 12; cf 1 Cor 15, 21–22.

<sup>5</sup> 1, 18; 3, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Jer 5, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 3, 23.

heartedness and preyed upon by incorrigible weaknesses.<sup>9</sup> Is it not true that many men today must confess, 'This is the story of my life'?

The fact is that Christ's coming has not effected a magic change in man. Even when, through Christ, a man of faith becomes the son of God, he still remains a son of Adam. Those who one day will 'wear the likeness of the heavenly man' must often endure upon earth the sad experience of 'wearing the likeness of the man made of dust'.<sup>10</sup> God's own Son, because he was incarnate, could trace his genealogy to Adam,<sup>11</sup> and, though personally free of sin, had to accept the limitations and the weaknesses of earthly flesh: 'God sent his Son in a form like that of our own sinful nature'.<sup>12</sup>

This univocal character of humanity both before and after Christ explains why St Paul is indiscriminate in urging upon all men the divine efficacy and their pressing need of the reconciliation which Christ makes possible. The two pauline texts most relevant to this<sup>13</sup> are equally compelling even though they are inserted, respectively, into the context of life before Christ and life after Christ. Paul writes within the story of man's life as it derived from Adam and groped in darkness without the light of Christ.<sup>14</sup> 'When we were still powerless . . .', 'While we were God's enemies . . .':<sup>15</sup> these are the phrases used by Paul to describe men at odds with God and with one another because Christ had not yet come to 'break down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall'.<sup>16</sup>

The second incisive text appears in a context dealing with christian life itself. It forms only a small part of Paul's thorough defence of his apostolic role in the early Church. To prove his sincerity and uprightness of motive in carrying on the work of ministry, he appeals to his constant preoccupation with the final searching judgment of God, when 'each man will receive what is due to him for his conduct'.<sup>17</sup> For himself, as for every christian, this is a frightening prospect. It is precisely 'with this fear of the Lord before his eyes'<sup>18</sup> that Paul looks to Christ and writes his beautiful words of comforting hope in the reconciliation which the Son of God provides.

To men of today, as to men of all times, Paul utters a single

<sup>9</sup> Rom 7, 14-25.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 15, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Lk 3, 38.

<sup>12</sup> Rom 8, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Rom 5, 1-11; 2 Cor 5, 18; 6, 2. If, at this point, both these texts are read carefully, this familiarity with their contents will facilitate a full grasp of later developments in this article.

<sup>14</sup> Rom 5, 1-11; cf 1, 18; 3, 23; 5, 12-19.

<sup>15</sup> Rom 5, 6, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Eph 2, 14.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Cor 5, 10.

<sup>18</sup> 2 Cor 5, 11.

message. If 'from head to foot there is not a sound spot in you, nothing but bruises and weals and raw wounds';<sup>19</sup> if, as christian or non-christian, you cry out, 'Miserable creature that I am, who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death?' – the Apostle answers resoundingly, 'God alone, through Christ Jesus our Lord'.<sup>20</sup>

*God alone reconciles the world*

Unfortunately many christians find it difficult to share St Paul's God-mindedness. They call themselves men and women of faith; but the only person they instinctively believe in is themselves. They enjoy *their* feelings of God; they set forth learnedly *their* thoughts about his word; they count up and rely on their efforts to serve him – like little Linus clutching his 'security blanket'. The life of faith is always limited if it is construed only as a matter of affirming 'I believe that . . .' Undoubtedly, belief in the content of God's revelation is essential for christian life. But always the first and most important aspect of faith is the heartfelt conviction expressed in the words, 'I believe *in God* who reveals himself as my Father, full of love and wisdom; in the divine Word who became my brother to reveal the Father's loving thought and will; in the holy Spirit who, with fire and unction, interiorizes the presence of God in whoever will receive him'.

This is the faith-attitude which Paul strove to form in his converts. Equivalently he kept saying to them what Yahweh had said to Abraham, 'Look up to heaven and count the stars'.<sup>21</sup> Personally faithful to this directive, Paul always centred his own vision on the 'sky' that God is: lighted by the 'stars', but so much more vast than the stellar rays which reveal his wise thoughts and loving will. When Paul spells out the christian's duty to believe every word of God and to practise it, he writes under the prompting of keen awareness that God's immense love calls for full acceptance and unfailing fidelity. For this God-minded man, christian life is always and only man's grateful response to the God who loves him infinitely. Paul would have understood perfectly the words which Margery Kempe of Lynn heard in her heart: 'Not all your prayers and penances and good works mean so much to me as that you should believe that I love you'.

It is quite to be expected, therefore, that the two major texts on

<sup>19</sup> Isai 1, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Rom 7, 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> Gen 15, 5.

reconciliation speak first of what God has done, before they enjoin the practical directive, 'Be reconciled to God!' In order to focus attention on the divine initiative, Paul notes in detail the operative roles of Christ and the holy Spirit. He also emphasizes the single word 'God', to underscore the truth that reconciliation has its eminent source and cause in him who is Lord and Father of all men: '*God* designed him (Christ) to be the means of expiating sin';<sup>22</sup> '*God* was in Christ reconciling the world to himself';<sup>23</sup> '*God* has proven his love for us . . . when we were yet sinners'.<sup>24</sup>

To identify this 'God' with the Trinitarian Father would introduce a distinction which Paul is not making. Formed in a Jewish background, his thought centres on the unique God-Father of Israel, even when he adores this same God revealed as triune by Jesus. What Paul wants to say is that the whole of God is wholly involved in drawing man to himself. Like the devoted father whom Luke describes,<sup>25</sup> the Father who is in heaven watched tirelessly all during the days of the Old Covenant for the return of his prodigal son who had squandered the patrimony, betrayed his sonship, and now lived in remorseful isolation.

But this portrait of father and son is much larger than the Old Testament story of God and Israel; in fact, there is something timeless about it. If the elect people under the Old Covenant constantly played the prodigal, so too God's sons in the New Covenant can equally commit 'the double crime of abandoning the fountain of living water to dig cisterns for themselves, leaky cisterns that hold no water'.<sup>26</sup> And all the while the eternal Father waits and watches, untiring in his solicitude, infinitely immense in his love: *immensus Pater, immensus Filius, immensus Spiritus Sanctus*. The words of repining and of assurance which the God of Israel once uttered still echo through every corridor of time:

Is Ephraim so dear a son to me, a child so favoured,  
That after each threat of mine  
I must still remember him, still yearn for him,  
I am filled with tenderness towards him.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Reconciliation in and through Christ*

This goodness of God breathes hope into the heart of every man.

<sup>22</sup> Rom 3, 25.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Cor 5, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Rom 5, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Lk 15, 11-32.

<sup>26</sup> Jer 2, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Jer 31, 20.

Once experienced, it becomes the theme of an eternal canticle: 'The mercies of the Lord I will sing forever'.<sup>28</sup> But love, if it stands alone, becomes fatuous and ineffective. Solid and true devotedness is always alive with creative thought, ever seeking a fool-proof plan to insure acceptance of its own self-giving. Thus the love of parents for their children, if it is to be more than whimsical emotion, requires both a well thought-out pedagogical programme and faithful adherence to its basic principles. He from whom all paternity derives could not act differently. Scripture, therefore, speaks not only of God's love and mercy; it celebrates also the wisdom of his plan and the fidelity with which he carried it out: 'Yahweh is righteous in all his ways, unchanging in all that he does'.<sup>29</sup>

Though the people of the Old Covenant lived under a lowering night, the unfailing word of a wise and loving Father kept always alight a beacon of promise which man's infidelity could never extinguish. Through his prophets, God repeatedly pledged fulfilment of his plan for ultimate and perfect reconciliation. The imageful predictions of the prophets are many and diverse; but each of these is a prismatic ray refracted from the single white light of God's infinite design.

His plan was very simple. One day a son would return to him from the land of alienation; and this return would be unique. Israel's seers never dreamed of its full richness. So full-hearted would be this son's seeking of his Father that he would receive instant and total welcome both for himself and for all his brothers. Through him and in him the world would become God's beloved family, a perfect Israel, a new creation.

The words of veiled hope uttered by the prophets pale before the reality of fulfilment. Its blinding light is filtered softly in the words of St Paul: 'When the fulness of time came, God sent his Son born of a woman, born under the Law, that he could redeem those under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons'.<sup>30</sup> Weak, recalcitrant prodigals were to become beloved sons of God in and through his own divine Son; only infinite wisdom could have devised this plan. Contemplating this boundless mystery of immense love, Paul can only repeat the thankful glorying of the baptismal hymn cherished by the early Church: 'Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Before the world was made, he chose us, chose

<sup>28</sup> Ps 89, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Ps 145, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Gal 4, 4-5.

us in Christ . . . determining that we should become his adopted sons through Jesus Christ'.<sup>31</sup>

At no point in his letters does St Paul discourse at length on all that these words involved. Perhaps his voice would have choked with tears if he had tried to describe what Jesus's return to the Father demanded. He does no more than state the bare facts. His incisive words about the death of Jesus – its 'obedience', its nailing to the cross of a body like ours, the loving fidelity of its motivation – sum up in capsule form the Abraham-Isaac pattern which Christ fulfilled with eminent pain in returning to his Father.<sup>32</sup> Paul repeats this theme but never expands on it. By preference he fixes his gaze on Jesus's actual return to the Father through resurrection; his epistles are a paean of praise to Christ the Lord of glory and a hymn of thanksgiving for the rich efficacy of his risen life.

It is the author of the epistle to the Hebrews who spells out in detail how the 'perfecting' of Jesus as the High Priest who consecrates men as sons of God involved the 'perfecting' of Jesus in every fibre of his humanity. This letter works wonders with the double meaning of the pregnant greek word for 'perfect' (*teleioun*). Because the greek translation of the Old Testament uses *teleioun* to render the hebrew term for priestly consecration (*mille' yadim*), the author of Hebrews utilizes *teleioun* to describe the resurrection-return of Jesus as a priestly investiture empowering him to consecrate his brothers as God's sons. At the same time, because the word *teleioun* also means 'to perfect ethically', its use in this epistle calls attention to the fact that the priestly efficacy of Jesus's resurrection-return flows from and rewards a fidelity that remained constant through progressive human experiences. If, through resurrection, God 'perfected' his incarnate Son as the priestly consecrator of the human race, this was precisely because all of Jesus's actions and sufferings were already 'perfected ethically' by his loving obedience to the Father and by his devotedness to those whom God had created and called.

The epistle to the Hebrews lingers gratefully over the painful yet joyous story of the incarnate Word, who became our brother in this land of alienation, that he might trace for us the way that leads straight to the Father's house. Jesus's odyssey, therefore, contained all the elements of human reconciliation with God. His last act of pouring out his life-blood in a living flame of love for his Father and for men was but the final moment in the straight course of his

<sup>31</sup> Eph 1, 3-5.

<sup>32</sup> Cf Gen 22, 1-10.

journeying; the crowning act of his resurrection was like a leap of flame into the bosom of his Father for whom he had always longed.

By his priestly 'perfecting' through resurrection, the incarnate Son of God is now able, as our very own brother, to provide all the life and strength we need for our journeying. By the ethical 'perfecting' of his earthly life, with its full measure of love for God and for men, he sets before us his own clear road-map for the way of our going and the life of our ephemeral passing.

St Paul himself speaks the final word. In two crisp sentences he lifts the veil to reveal compellingly that this experience of Jesus cannot fail us. To those who fear that the Christ-event may be ineffective, like a dream from which we awake, Paul points to him 'from whom all things come and for whom we exist'.<sup>33</sup> With disarming simplicity he gives assurance that the saving work of Christ comes from the infinite God whose word is substance, whose will is reality, and whose design cannot fail. 'From first to last', he says, 'this has been the work of God. He has reconciled us men to himself through Christ . . . What I mean is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.<sup>34</sup> For this no other word of comment is possible except the word which Paul himself utters: 'This is God's own proof of his love for us'.<sup>35</sup>

*Love poured out by the holy Spirit*

All that now remains to be done is that man speak his heartfelt 'Yes, Father' to God's inexpressible gift of reconciliation. To show what this act of faith will accomplish, Paul makes wondrous use of an Old Testament image. Once a year, on the feast of Expiation, the Jewish high priest entered the inviolate Holy of Holies. With the life-blood of the victim he had sacrificed, he sprinkled the mercy-seat of God's presence over the ark. This aspersion of the victim's blood on the very symbol of God's presence was intended to awaken Israel to its need for purification and union, the commingling of its life with the very life of God. But, because of Israel's waywardness, this reminder remained ineffectual. Looking back now, we realize that the real value of this expiatory rite was its aptness to symbolize the unfailing power of the expiation of Christ.

By the outpouring of blood with which God's own Son anointed his body, God's true mercy-seat, all sin is dissolved, and perfect union with God and man is forged in the hearts of all those who live

<sup>33</sup> 1 Cor 8, 6.

<sup>34</sup> 2 Cor 5, 18-19.

<sup>35</sup> Rom 5, 8.



with grateful faith. From the moment of the death-resurrection, every man can have, through Jesus, total access to the home and to the heart of the Father. This is what St Paul means when he assures the roman christians, 'It is through faith and through Jesus that we have access to this grace (i.e., the enjoyment of God's loving presence) in which we stand'.<sup>36</sup> Because of what Christ has done and is doing, every man can live in the Father's presence every moment of his earthly life, utterly certain that God delights to hear his ceaseless word of filial trust and devotedness, 'Abba!'<sup>37</sup> If this is our assured confidence for the present, how much more rich is our hope for the future. 'If, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life!'<sup>38</sup>

All this seems too good to be true. How can we live as sons of God while we are still painfully aware of our weakness as sons of Adam? The answer is as clear as it is simple. The athanasian creed puts upon our lips not only the words, *Immensus Pater, Immensus Filius*, but also the equally precious word, *Immensus Spiritus Sanctus*. St Paul does not mention the holy Spirit in his description of the reconciling mystery of Jesus's death and resurrection. The reason for this is easy to understand. Instructed by the thought-patterns of Old Testament expectancy and deeply impressed by the actual New Testament fulfilment, Paul identifies the work of the Spirit with the continual task of interiorizing the mystery of reconciliation in the hearts of men. This distinctive work of Christ and his holy Spirit in the 'economic' unfolding of God's wise and merciful plan is recalled and honoured in the pauline introduction to the celebration of every eucharist: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with you all'.<sup>39</sup>

The holy Spirit, therefore, may be aptly described as the very heart of the life of the Church. He makes it truly the Body of Christ that it may bear in itself Christ's full power to reconcile men to the Father and to form them into devoted children. The content and integrity of the Church's teaching, the sanctifying action of its

<sup>36</sup> Rom 5, 2.

<sup>37</sup> This word, previously unknown in the jewish prayer-vocabulary, was Jesus's unique expression in addressing his Father. The syrian church fathers, St John Chrysostom and Theodoret of Cyre, report from their own experiences that small children used to call their fathers *abba* (i.e., 'Daddy', 'Papa'); cf Joachim Jeremias, 'Abba' in *The Prayers of Jesus* (London, 1967), pp 11-65.

<sup>38</sup> Rom 5, 10.

<sup>39</sup> 2 Cor 13, 13.

sacraments, the charism of its pastors to guide and to safeguard – all this perennial work of the mystery of God in Christ is communicated to the Church by the active and constant ‘fellowship’ of the Spirit with the living members of the Body of Christ. The words which the priest prays in the third eucharistic canon apply not only to the Mass, as the effective memorial of God’s saving action through Christ, but also to every divine aspect of the Church’s life: ‘Father, all life, all holiness come from you, through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord *by the working of the holy Spirit*’.

It is a matter of equal importance that the mercy of God is received by man and becomes active in him precisely because the holy Spirit prompts him to speak the ‘Yes, Father’ of grateful acceptance. In the words of Paul, ‘The love which God has for us is poured into our hearts by the Spirit who has been given to us’.<sup>40</sup> Expressed in the language of today, this affirmation means that the Spirit so interiorizes God’s loving presence that this gift becomes the deepest well-spring of man’s authentic character and convictions. Because of this inward presence and transforming action of God, the christian is inspired and empowered by the Spirit to live constantly with the love and fidelity of Jesus’s filial word, ‘Abba!’<sup>41</sup>

Whatever may be said about the divine wonder of this gift must never obscure the personal manner of its possession. This all-important personal aspect of our life is stated by St Thomas Aquinas with his customary clarity: ‘Things are not good by the divine goodness but by their own goodness’.<sup>42</sup> Everything, therefore, that St Paul has written in Romans 8 and Galatians 5 about the gifts of the holy Spirit are words that challenge each man to form convictions of his own and to act accordingly. The purpose of God’s gifts is always to make man God-like according to the model of Christ his Son.

If, then, the Spirit gives sonship, it is I who must live the prayer, ‘Abba, Father!’ If the Spirit helps our weakness, it is I who must grow strong. The Spirit’s prayer of ‘unutterable groanings’ becomes real only in the agonizing plea for help and pardon that tears my own heart. The Spirit’s gift of the charity, kindness and forgiveness of the heart of Christ is truly a gift only when it becomes the active and generous love that I share with my brothers. If the Spirit works

<sup>40</sup> Rom 5, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Cf Gal 4, 5–6.

<sup>42</sup> *Summa Theol.* I, q. 6, art 4, *sed contra*.

ceaselessly to conform me to the image of Christ, it is my own fully christian character which must radiate the glory of God shining on the face of Christ Jesus. In a word, the Spirit's communication of God's love means the true authenticity of myself as God's living image.

*God amidst the 'Pots and Pipkins'*

Let us return once more to the scene in the London Charterhouse. The saintly Carthusians, men like ourselves, were intent only on their practical duty of putting all things right with God and with one another. Their words and actions, commonplace enough, seem as tinged with fear of the Lord as our own daily strivings to be good christians. But isn't this the whole substance of our poor life here below?

While we are still on earth, God is always hidden from us, even though he is always present amid 'the pots and pipkins' in the basement kitchen where we live our life. All we can do is to believe heartfully in his loving presence and to serve him with the humble deeds of devoted fidelity. But the day will come when, at long last, he will lift the veil. In that glorious endless moment we shall see him as he is, face to face. And in his light we shall see too, with boundless joy, that the whole of our life's journey to him has been the gift of his infinite love.