

THE DIVINE GENEROSITY

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE incident of the widow's offering at the temple (Lk 21, 1-4) should teach us to think of generosity not in terms of quantity but as a quality of the spirit. Jesus saw the widow's offering as a symbol of her whole livelihood; it was the expression of the poverty out of which she gave, and her gift was not two copper coins but herself. As Paul was to write later on, I can give away all that I have and still not be generous if there is no love in my giving. In fact I can really start being generous when the only thing I have to give and want to give is myself. This seems to me to be the sense of Jesus's becoming poor that through his poverty we might be enriched. He came to give himself. He was the *fructus ventris generosi*, the fruit of the generous womb of Mary who felt her poverty before God at the Annunciation in her awareness that all she has to give was herself. But her generosity generated the Life of the world, and her awareness of her poverty permitted the fulfilment of the *Magnificat*.

Generosity, then, has to do with a particular quality of giving. It is the giving of self out of love, and out of an awareness that all we have to give is self, in such a way that new life is born out of our giving. But where does this lead us when we start reflecting on the divine generosity in the context of what is called 'grace'?

To begin with, we learn about giving from God. He is the giver of all good gifts and the source of all giving. But what does that imply? Perhaps our understanding is clouded by an imagination of God as some sort of super-millionaire dispensing largesse out of his treasury. And since that treasury is infinite, whatever he gives leaves it undiminished and him untouched. Perhaps too, we are so infected by this materialistic age as to imagine that God gives us things. If so, it is time to correct such imaginings. In order to understand what we mean by God's giving, his divine generosity, it will be useful to get back to the religious vision of the first chapter of Genesis and its counterpart in the first chapter of John's gospel, two passages that belong to the well-springs of our christian spirituality.

The first chapter of Genesis opens our eyes to the vision of all things emerging from the unity of the Creator working through his

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Spirit and his Word. 'The Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said . . .'. The Spirit and the Word – the two hands of God, as Irenaeus called them: through these the creative power of the Father fashioned all things. John does not name the Spirit in his first chapter, but how could God pronounce his creative Word without the breath of his Spirit? God is Spirit; such is his way of being, and that way of being takes form and is manifested to us in his Word, through whom all things are made. It is the very unity of God that permits the countless variety of his creation. Beneath the apparent diversity of creation lies a unity that has its source in Father, Son, Spirit.

The breath of God which is the breath of life, his Spirit, cannot be separated from God. And what word can God utter except the word that is God himself and was with God in the beginning? Where the Spirit is, there is freedom, the freedom of God's spontaneous creation. At the same time there is love, for God is love. So, in creating, God pours out freely the expression of the love that is his being in a supreme act of communication. In this light we can see the whole cosmos as a poem of God's love:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament
proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes through all the earth,
and their words to the end of creation (Ps 19, 1-4).

Here the psalmist (as again in psalm 148) gives expression to a vision of the cosmos as the language of God, the lyrical outpouring of himself.

We forget that God started this whole business of communication that we, today, find so difficult. Our words are not ourselves; our facial expression is a mask as we bare our teeth in a smile that goes no deeper than our tooth enamel (highly polished and deodorized of course); our gestures point away from ourselves. So often our attempts at communication create more distance than proximity between ourselves and others. But God's communication with us is quite other. It is nothing less than the outpouring and sharing of his own way of being – his Spirit – in the utterance of his creative Word. His breath is the breath of life; so that God's communication brings

into being water, rocks, fishes, insects, birds, animals and plants. All these myriad aspects of creation share, each in its own way, in the being of God and, for eyes that can see, are symbols of his presence, and, to ears that can hear, a message of his love in all its grandeur and gentleness, its power and its compassion, its delight and its agony. As William Blake said, 'If the doors of our perceptions were cleansed we would see everything as it is, infinite'. God's language is himself; to hear his Word is to share his life in all its abundance. The great gestures of his creation reveal and express his being. His works are not things apart from himself; God is his works, though no single one of them nor their totality is him. God is the power of the ocean, the beauty of a flower, the gentleness of the dew, the awesomeness of a great mountain; but none of them are him. God is every human being, though no human being is God. His fulness is only in his Word; and his Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

'And from his fulness we have all received, grace upon grace'. Man, male and female, is made in the image and likeness of his Creator, who breathed into him the breath of his own Spirit of love and freedom, making of man, male and female, the prelude to him who is the last great Amen to the hymn of the universe: the Word made flesh who is Jesus Christ. In Christ we share, not in the superfluity of God but in his fulness.

In Christ we are fellow-heirs of that fulness, and his great cry of 'Abba' resounds in our own hearts through his Spirit who lives in us.

This religious vision of God, man, the cosmos, sees all that is created issuing forth from the unity of God in a movement that is at the same time a return to that unity when Christ, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, will be all in all. For in his going forth, the eternal Word does not leave his Father's side. Even as he is uttered in that creative 'let there be . . .', that utterance is a return to God whose word does not go forth and return empty. The creative Word, who is in the bosom of the Father, is made flesh; and his becoming man is a return to his Father. But as he returns he bears with him, as part of his own being, all that is created; and he gives to the Eternal what he could not of himself have had: a history.

Mankind is created under the sign of unity, and is destined to find its consummation in unity. Between these two poles, that are really one, stands Christ, the new Adam, who reaffirms in himself that unity and seals its consummation as he breathes forth his

Spirit of unity in love. Whatever attempts to sunder this unity, to separate and divide, is what we call sin. Sin separated man from woman, and both from God, and set brother against brother. Sin erects barriers between God and man, and between man and his fellow man. But the gift of God, who is Jesus Christ, heals that rift at its root and remains with us as the pledge that his radical healing will continue through history. His presence assures us that the human race has no need to look for some dramatic intervention of a *deus ex machina* to cure its ills. The remedy is within us and within our history, because God is in Christ, the Lord of history.

From all this we can see that the only God we know is a God who is an immense movement of giving. He is a verb 'to give', conjugated in every possible mood; and his giving is of himself. His gift is not a thing but a person, a communication of himself and his being. For the gift of God who contains all his giving is the person Jesus Christ, the living manifestation of God's 'givingness'. He came as one given to us, born for us, living in order to give himself for our sakes: 'This is my body which is given for you'.

To receive the Spirit whom Jesus gives is to enter into and become part of that great movement of the givingness of God. In Jesus we share in the life of God, in a movement of giving that is receiving, and of receiving that is giving. We receive the Spirit who is pure gift, and so become gift ourselves; and we give as Jesus did, as those who have received everything in their giving. That movement is in each one of us a reproduction in microcosm of the macrocosmic movement of creation, issuing forth and returning in the Spirit and the Word to the source of all unity. That movement is not something separated from its source, any more than my running and walking are separated from my body. The movement, like the gift, is God himself. The gift is Jesus the Lord.

Small wonder that the word 'gift', 'charis', 'grace', is one of the key words of the New Testament. But in order to penetrate the meaning of that word, we must understand it in terms of an action, not as a thing to be measured in quantity. Grace is the personal action of God, whereby he comes to us to bind us to himself with the bonds of that eternal love who is his Spirit, and to recreate us by his Word who is our brother. That personal action of God is made visible to us in the person of Jesus, his supreme gift. Hence what the old terminology called subsistent grace is simply a way of saying that grace is a person: the person of Jesus. Jesus is the generosity of God, his free giving, come to give us life.

Furthermore, Jesus is the mediator between God and man. Mediator, not as one who does a sort of spiritual shuttle-service between God and ourselves, but as one who draws the two into one in the unity of his own person. He is mediator by virtue of being God and man, eternal Word and new Adam; and therefore this personal movement of giving is bound up with his humanity. Jesus gives through his being human. His human being is the way in which God gives himself to us. But for Jesus, to be human meant to be a Jew, to be the inheritor of the history of Israel and, beyond and through Israel, of the whole of human history. Hence St Bernard of Clairvaux, so imbued with the vision of unity, could say that the incarnation of Jesus was not the arrival of one who had been absent, but the appearing of one who had always been there, but hidden. He is the uncovering of an eternal presence in a world of time, of infinity at the heart of the finite.

The Word who was in the beginning and through whom all things were made tells us that God is present in his givingness in every aspect of our cosmos. The evolution of that cosmos, of man and of the historical and social structures of our world, can all participate in the givingness of God. It is this participation that the classic terminology calls actual grace. The term simply affirms that the gift of God comes to us through all that constitutes our human living and environment.

God's givingness works through his uncreated Spirit and his uncreated Word, and we share in that givingness. But we are created beings; so that the way in which we share in God's givingness cannot be the same as the way in which the Spirit and the Word share. To mark this difference, theologians coined the term 'created grace', to make sure that I do not think I am the holy Spirit. The term is useful as long as we understand that what is created is not grace but our way of sharing in God's life and in his creative and redemptive activity. In creating us, God created a new way of sharing in his own giving, which is one and indivisible.

It is important to hold on to the truth that God's personal givingness, grace, is one reality from his side. It is a single movement proceeding from his unity. But our participation in that movement is multiple from our side, because none of us is God. A whole vocabulary was invented to describe this multiplicity of our sharing, and unfortunately it was misunderstood as if it designated different 'sorts' of grace. But the grace of God is one. It is Christ, though we each of us receive that one gift according to our varying needs and

capacities. The word of God is one, but it can be spoken with an infinite variety of modulation and heard in many different ways. The word can be a word of forgiveness and healing; so we call it medicinal. The word can avert us from evil; so we call it prevenient. The word never falls short of our capacity to hear and willingness to receive it; so we call it sufficient. (The fact is, however, that the generosity of God always exceeds our capacity.) Finally, the word will never fail us; so we call it efficacious.

Since God is holy and draws us to himself to share his life, his grace makes us holy as he is holy; so we call it sanctifying. Not that sanctifying grace is another sort of grace; it simply designates one of the effects from our side of receiving the one gift of God. But if God invites us to share his life, that sharing must become for us a way of being that is his way of being. God's way of being is the Spirit of love and freedom, and to live in that Spirit as a way of life is what is called habitual grace: the divine givingness becomes a way of life with us as it is with God.

Finally, since the sacraments were named the means of holiness (and that is certainly one but not the only aspect of the sacramental reality), they became known as 'channels of grace'. Unfortunately, when people had lost sight of the unity of grace, these 'channels' became seven separate pipe-lines. Add to this a theology that made a 'thing' out of grace, and forgot that Jesus is the grace of God, and we end up with a sort of spiritual soda-fountain, dispensing seven different flavours of this thing called grace, with God as the president of a heavenly Coca-Cola Corporation.

But the sacraments are one, because they stem from Christ who is the sacrament of the world. Here again the reality is one from his side and multiple from our side. The misunderstanding of this is perhaps best seen in an attitude to the sacrament of penance which is unfortunately still prevalent and being taught. People are encouraged to approach the sacrament of penance 'to get the grace of the sacrament'. But what does that mean? Who is the Christ whom we meet in the sacrament of penance? He is the Christ who reconciles to his body those who have voluntarily sundered their relationship with him and with his Church. We come to him as those who need to be reconciled to his body, and to be healed of serious wounds. This work of reconciliation is the primary purpose of the sacrament. The new rite of reconciliation stresses this, as it also stresses the community aspect of the sacrament. In this context, for those who are not estranged from the body of Christ, to approach the sacra-

ment to get 'the grace of the sacrament' makes little sense. The same Christ who heals our serious ills is the Christ whom we meet in the Eucharist. A real need to deepen within ourselves our awareness of how much we are indebted to the loving mercy of God, even when we are not conscious of serious sin, may lead one person to approach the sacrament of penance; whilst it may lead another to the Eucharist, or another to prayer, yet all approach the same Christ.

The classic vocabulary of the theology of grace may have had its place. But its great defect was that it arrested the flow of the movement of God's giving and led people to think of grace as a thing rather than as a person. But the theology of grace rightly understood is the theology of God's effective love for the human race, of his effective communication of himself through his Spirit and his Word. This communication creates in us the capacity to respond. Furthermore, the very structure of our response is given to us in the mode of God's giving of himself. He gives as one who initiates love and loves freely, eliciting in us an awareness and openness to love. He gives in reconciliatory compassion, and we respond with conversion of heart. He gives in utter fidelity, and we respond with faith. In the gift is the response, even as our prayer in the name of Jesus is our prayer to the Father.

The generosity of God is boundless; not in the sense that he has given us so much in such a richly varied cosmos, but because he who is without bounds has never given us anything but himself. This is the poverty of God, to desire to give only himself. In that gift of himself is the creative love that brings all things to be. To become aware of the quality of God's generosity is to understand that our response is not to be thought of in terms of giving him things or doing things for him. Rather, we must respond, as Mary did, out of our own poverty, our understanding that the only real gift is ourselves. In that gift we respond in kind to the divine generosity, and enter freely into that movement of personal giving that is called grace.