FAITHFUL TO THE GOSPEL

By GEORGE EARLE

I CAN'T get Terry out of my mind. He was one of two hundred Confirmation candidates last May. Everyone agreed that it was a wonderful evening; the teachers and the Archbishop had tirelessly prepared the children and their parents; inconspicuous crowd control, colour, music and solemn words movingly demonstrated that the Holy Spirit was at work among us. What did it mean to Terry? He looked so smart and devout that evening; and yet we have hardly seen him inside the church since then. Is he going the way of his brothers and most of the young people in this district? I doubt whether Terry will ever hear of Hippo. He will be in his thirties at the beginning of the next century and I can picture him surveying the dust-laden ruins of a once mighty diocese.

Whether we relish a tale of woe or resent it is largely a matter of temperament, but the facts are there: churches poorly attended, churches closed, fewer ordinations to the priesthood, a drop in vocations to the religious life, marriages broken, a shortage of well-informed, active lay helpers, the poor level of participation by parents of children in our schools, the simultaneous defection of working class and professional class Christians, the average age of penitents. In thirty years from now the comparison with Hippo may not seem quite so ridiculous.

'Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to enquire how we ought to renew ourselves, so that we may be found increasingly faithful to the gospel of Christ'. Thus spoke the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in their opening message to all men and nations. We can look at Terry and his family and say: What is wrong with them? Or we can look at ourselves and ask: What is wrong with us? Christians of every complexion are likely to agree that a return to the gospel must be part of our answer. The Council turned out to be both encouraging and frightening:

> It is evident that all the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fulness of Christian life (*Lumen Gentium* 40).

While paying Terry this handsome compliment, the Council Fathers then weighed him down by putting the Bible into his hands:

> Easy access to sacred scripture should be provided for all the Christian Faithful (*Dei Verbum*, 22).
>
> This Sacred Synod earnestly and specifically urges all the Christian Faithful . . . to learn by frequent reading of the divine scriptures the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ (*Dei Verbum*, 25).

Terry's dilemma is acutely obvious. He either goes on ignoring the Bible, in which case he will drift further away from his past and the present life of the Church. Or he will take up this difficult book and so fall headlong into the errors of protestantism. The first alternative may not alarm us too much. People lapse when they abandon Mass, Holy Communion and Confession. We think too easily about weak Catholics who wander away from the Church and too little about weak Catholics who wither inside the Church. The faithful who cannot share the Scriptures with one another, with their past and with other Churches are in danger of becoming eccentric sectarians: statue touchers, pilgrims to obscure shrines, marchers in outdated nationalist processions, selective in their genuflexions to authority, eager to receive ashes and assiduous in the cult of the dead. It is an irony of popular catholicism that we have been quick to threaten or exclude certain types of people such as mild scholars who ask awkward questions or young couples who make disastrous marriages. At the same time we smile benevolently on those who hold that human effort is all powerful, that revenge is sweet or that God cannot possibly forgive them. Would it be possible thus to ignore Jesus if we were to return to the gospel?

If I am correct in thinking that the Holy Spirit is calling Terry back to Jesus, to be more active in the Church and to be more faithful to the gospel, then the second horn of the dilemma becomes menacingly apparent. It is the awful lesson of four centuries of protestantism which deters us from placing the Bible into the hands of ill-prepared layfolk. What could be worse than producing another crop of Anabaptists or sceptics, of splintering into thousands of sects, of urging each man to be his own pope or priest and eventually of emptying our churches as effectively as they have done? I can sympathize more readily with those who fight a rearguard action against Vatican II, which they sincerely regard as a protestant trojan horse, than with those who pay enthusiastic lip-service to the Council while keeping the good book firmly closed.

In recent decades two monsters have appeared to frighten us away from the Bible: fundamentalism and modern scholarship. There is no doubt about the widespread character of fundamentalism: millions in the United States as well as influential sectors of Judaism and Islam. Most of us have had the unnerving experience of meeting a fundamentalist and being courteously, but firmly, dismissed from Christendom for failing to accept a particular selection or interpretation of texts. On the surface, the fundamentalist is absolutely certain that he is right and refuses to listen to any other point of view, let alone accept it. Underneath there seems to be fear leading to aggression. Perhaps fundamentalism is rather a disease in need of understanding than an intellectual position calling for debate. Perhaps too there is a trace of the fundamentalist in us all: preferring the safety and comfort of established positions, muscle-bound inertia, a personal drama peopled by enemies. A Church which for so long regarded Trent as the last word, whose seminary professors bored and frightened students away from the Bible, which sent out some of the odder documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission at the beginning of this century, cannot be wholly innocent of fundamentalism. Some of my protestant friends nervously ask me whether we have finally driven out the leaven of this tyranny.

We are in danger of not taking the rash assertions of fundamentalists seriously enough, but we can go to the other extreme and take too seriously the apologies, the hesitations, the downright negations of the scholars. Did Jesus speak these words? Was he wrong about the end of the world? Was Mary a virgin? Did the Gospels change much in those fateful years between the death of Jesus and the first written Gospel? Did John write his Gospel? Is this passage simply a re-working of Old Testament texts? The men who ask these unnerving questions often come armed with immense knowledge, penetrating minds, an overpowering capacity for work and saintly dispositions. It is easy to let such potentates persuade us that unless we know Hebrew and Greek and have read Bultmann, we cannot possibly make sense of a gospel. Our acknowledged sense of inferiority can drive us back into fundamentalism or out into the seas of unbelief. Not surprisingly, nervous pastors are more common than endangered sheep. In fact I have yet to meet a lapsed Catholic whose absence from our benches can be ascribed to a surfeit of scripture reading.

How foolish we are to set Terry against the professors! For —

amazingly — they depend on each other so much. The Gospels did not drop down ready-made from heaven; nor did they come from the pens of impeccably agnostic reporters accurately recording the words and actions of Jesus. They were woven together by skilful editors, whom we call evangelists, from innumerable threads and patches. The four distinctive gospel tapestries can be seen on closer inspection to be composed of separate fragments often used with subtle variations by each gospel writer. A single fragment was a saying, a deed, a story, a scene, lovingly remembered, repeated and passed on. These shorter or longer passages can be thought of as the raw material of the Gospels. They were cherished and preserved because they started from and revivified a meeting with Jesus.

A meeting with Jesus can be seen as the final moment in God's affectionate quest for man; God the King, the Shepherd, the Lover at work in Jesus the King, the Shepherd, the Lover. From man's point of view, the years of waiting can be described as the history of the Jews or the cry of the deaf, the blind, the lepers, the lunatics, the outcasts, the mourners, the downtrodden and the prisoners. To do justice to a meeting with Jesus we have to pile metaphor on metaphor, saying on saying, story on story. We can never exhaust the infinite delicacy and persistence of God's pursuit nor the full range of human fears, ambitions, frustrations, follies and agonies. Man can be seen as answering God's call. God can be seen as granting man's request. The marvellous interchange between God and man, man and God, has to be painted on the huge canvas of inner dramas and external conflicts, but it can only be experienced and expressed by each individual in a heart that has been fashioned by his own personal story. Terry can only meet Jesus and Jesus can only meet Terry as the son of his parents and a young man of his times.

Crying out to Jesus, welcoming Jesus, trusting Jesus, turning to Jesus; the most ordinary human situations such as boredom or bereavement change to faith and prayer. The Gospels were not written by scholars for scholars. They sprang from faith and prayer, they were kept alive by faith and prayer, and they can only be fully appreciated by faith and prayer. The faithful need scholars to lead them back to the men of faith and prayer who made the Gospels in the first place; and the scholars need faith and prayer — in themselves and in others — to understand the genesis and growth of the Gospels. Men of faith and prayer, whether ill-instructed or learned, are the only people who can keep the Gospels alive and raise us all from the dust of antiquarianism.

Every meeting with Jesus will give added meaning to the gospel fragments and every gospel passage, freshly assimilated, will give depth and substance to our meetings with Jesus. The earliest gospel outlines appear to have been something like this:

> I taught you what I had been taught myself, namely that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried, and that he was raised to life on the third day in accordance with the scriptures (1 Cor 15,3-4). You killed him, but God raised him to life (Acts 2,23).

The meeting with Jesus develops from a conviction of the link between his goodness and my badness: his call to repentance (Mk 1,15; Acts 2,38). 'God called you out of darkness into his wonderful light' (1 Pet 2,9). The light is Jesus summoning me by everything he says and does to stop being as bad as I am to become as good as he is; from being a rebel to being a friend; from being a stranger to being one of the family. The light of his goodness shines back into the past, to remind me that my folk are sinful; and out into the world, to show me that I belong to a sinful generation. My parents marked me and I mark others. There is a dreadful traffic of infection between me and the people who surround me. The good news that God is close at hand (Mk 1,15) is simply recognizing the fact that God is at work in Jesus, gently overpowering evil and gathering his wayward children to himself.

'I did not come to call the virtuous but sinners' (Mk 2,17). Professional footballers are notoriously uninterested in violin lessons, and army recruits find it hard to take in the philosophy of Gandhi. In the same way the virtuous have no ears for the gospel. To understand this phenomenon, we have to observe that the gospel is addressed to sinners, and then to wonder why we are so reluctant to admit that we are sinners. To make the point that the Gospel is a message for sinners, I could remember that the primitive gospels in the Acts and Paul concentrate almost exclusively on the death and resurrection of Jesus; death is the apparent triumph of evil; resurrection the proof of his mastery over sin and death and a reconciliation with unfaithful friends. I could carefully follow Peter and his fellow disciples through all four Gospels. I could wonder why it is that the people who are most bluntly condemned by Jesus are the ones who are seriously trying to lead a good life. I could dwell on such powerful chapters as Luke 15 or Matthew 23; or return once

again to the wicked tenants (Mk 12,1-9) or the woman who had a bad name in the town (Lk 7,36-50).

'I am a sinful man' (Lk 5,8). For Peter and Paul this was the beginning of gospel life and the basis of gospel preaching. Knowing myself to be a sinner welcomed by Jesus (Lk 15,2) is the seed and sap of the Gospels; but how is it that such abundant sowing is cast by the wayside and choked by thorns? (Mk 4,1-20). Some have never met Jesus or the meeting has grown dim; thus they do not know who he is and what he asks of them. Sin for others is a second-hand list of faults learnt from a teacher years ago. Yet others take their sins pre-packaged from leaders of the Church rightly thundering against the evils of abortion or unemployment; so they slip into that convenient substitute for a sense of sin: pointing the finger at others. Alternatively I can think of sin as the first lesson in the book from which a mature person graduates into a more agreeable gospel. I can narrow my vision to decisions and actions that are fully conscious and deliberate; thus I fail to apprehend the sin that is buried deep within me and permeates the society around me. Most idiotic of all, I can fall into the utterly unscriptural notion that sin drives God away. What the Bible repeatedly proclaims is that God cannot abandon his stiff-necked sons and daughters.

If the tiny mustard seed of the Gospel is a meeting with Jesus and his call to repentance, the growth of the Gospel into the biggest shrub (Mk 4,30-32) can only flourish among people who share this experience among one another. The Gospels as we know them were created by groups of Christians who celebrated the memory of Jesus and felt his presence and power. The words and deeds of Jesus, treasured and pondered in their hearts (Lk 2,19.52), gave birth to local churches, which then gave shape to the Gospels. Gospel lovers have to be gospel makers. Why is this so? Because a gospel is not a museum piece to be reverently handed on. The work related in the Gospels goes on; in new places and new situations, Jesus still calls sinners to know his Father and to receive his Spirit.

The gospel of Jesus Christ experienced by such a variety of individuals and groups facing quite separate challenges must lead us to this disconcerting conclusion: the same gospel can be expressed in different ways. This is evident in the New Testament itself. The bare outlines in the Acts, the gospel of Paul, then the four Gospels, are strikingly different and yet the same gospel. Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, together with the countless unknown Christians from whom they drew their material, re-told the same stories and sayings

with surprising freedom and originality. If we have to pass through the same process by which a gospel creates a Church and then in turn creates its own distinctive gospel, we must surely expect to see an even greater profusion of accents. The gospel of war-weary, profoundly agnostic Britain is going to differ from the gospels of India and South America. Similarly the gospel of elderly people, who have grown up in secure communities, cannot be the same as the gospel of young people, who have learnt to question and reject the values of earlier generations.

No serious examiner could accuse the gospel writers of slavish copying. No serious Christian could accuse them of making up their stories as they went along. It is all very well to praise the freedom and originality of the first gospel speakers and writers and to urge us to imitate their creative talents. But how are we to know whether this is the same gospel, the true gospel of Jesus Christ? This is exactly the question that Paul had to face when he was falling out with Peter or trying to knock some sense into the unruly Christians of Corinth. There must be some safeguards. Indeed there are, and they can all be reduced to one:

> . . . the Holy Spirit
> whom the Father will send in my name,
> will teach you everything
> and remind you of all I have said to you (Jn 14,26).

So far as I know, it has never been maintained that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was confined to the four gospel writers. The Holy Spirit helped Paul to fuse into one frame the blinding light of his direct meeting with Christ (Gal 1,11-12) and the truth that had been passed on to him by others (1 Cor 11,23;15,3). The Holy Spirit ensures that a local church and its particular gospel do not become stranded in isolation. However aggressively and painfully, Peter and Paul did shake hands (Gal 2,9). It may not always be apparent in a specific debate or a particular moment, but 'the body of the faithful as a whole, anointed by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief' (*Lumen Gentium*, 12). From time to time it will be necessary to appeal to a higher authority, who should not be seen as an arbitrary power like the queen in *Alice*, but as a partner in 'a remarkable common effort'.

> The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living,

> teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the Word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully by divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit (*Dei Verbum*, 10).

The Holy Spirit at work in the living, teaching office of the Church also assists the humble scholars. Pius XII opened a new era in catholic scripture studies when he wrote *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, but it was only possible for him to do this because of the patient, meticulous work of obscure specialists. Gospel-making without scholarship is foolhardy obscurantism, just as exegesis without reference to the faithful is untrue to the gospel. And the needs of the faithful will always be met and satisfied in worship, instruction, mutual love and a passionate desire to help suffering brothers and sisters. The manifold gifts of the Spirit, joining together past and present, tradition and personal knowledge of Jesus, local and universal, leader and follower, scholar and faithful, all feed into one great river, the gift that is better than any of them (1 Cor 12,31): a love, truly divine, that takes flesh within the Church and, knowing no sectarian barriers, embraces all mankind. If we are still gasping for safeguards, there is always Gamaliel:

> If this enterprise, this movement of theirs is of human origin, it will break up of its own accord; but if it does in fact come from God, you will not only be unable to destroy them; you might find yourselves fighting against God (Acts 5,38-39).

The Magi were the first seekers of Jesus to warn us against following one star. Wiser successors have realized their need for a constellation of safeguards. Nevertheless, we still want to insure against blindness, deafness, loss of memory, faulty logic, ignorance and old-fashioned wickedness. The traumatic divisions of these last few centuries have left us with a paralysing obsession that we must not make mistakes. In the name of a sterile purity of doctrine the Bible was kept tight shut. The tentacular assaults of error are seldom deliberate or malicious; they seep in from our inheritance and environment. We prefer darkness (Jn 3,19); the way we think is not God's way, but man's (Mk 8,33); we do not understand, our minds are closed, we do not remember (Mk 8,17-19); we say 'we see' when in fact we are blind (Jn 9,41). Keeping error at bay means ignoring a

large part of the Bible. 'Get behind me Satan' (Mk 8,33). . . . 'I will never disown you' (Mk 14,31). . . . 'The truth I have now come to realize is that God does not have favourites' (Acts 10,34). There is no error so tenacious and potentially harmful as partial truth. Of course God chose the Jews, but they were sent out to teach all nations. Of course God led his people into the promised land, but they could not stay there. Of course Jesus died, but he rose again. Of course Jesus is Lord, but 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve' (Mk 10,45). There are many forms of error, but one, surely, is an inevitable step on the way to greater understanding:

> You foolish men! So slow to believe the full message of the prophets! Was it not ordained that the Christ should suffer and so enter his glory? (Lk 24,25).

I often wonder what would have happened to Peter if he had been obliged to face the twentieth-century press; or John, if his Gospel had appeared as a theological work — which of course it is! — from a german publisher in the 1970s. As I imagine the thunder-claps of protest and take refuge beneath my tiny certainties I remember:

> I, the light, have come into the world,
> so that whoever believes in me
> need not stay in the dark any more.
> If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully,
> it is not I who shall condemn him,
> since I have not come to condemn the world,
> but to save the world (Jn 12,45-47).

It may be a very good thing to keep the professional theologians on their toes, but as he opens the Bible I hope we shall allow Terry a few mistakes.