DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

The Syriac Tradition III: St Ephrem (2)

IN AN issue of *The Way* devoted to the living voice of Tradition — the Divine Spirit calling across time and space to the human heart and intelligence, fashioned and refashioned in the Incarnate Word Jesus, Son of the Most High — it is appropriate that we return to Ephrem the Deacon. He was born between the two rivers, the confines of the primeval Paradise; and he elucidates for us his thoughts and feelings as he reads how Moses in his book described the creation, 'so that both the natural world and his book might testify to the creator', as 'witnesses which reach everywhere, found at all times':

> I read the opening of this book
> and was full of joy,
> for its verses and lines
> spread out their arms to welcome me . . .
> and when I reached that line
> where the story of Paradise is written,
> it lifted me up
> and transported me from the bosom of the book
> to the very bosom of Paradise . . .
> Scripture named it Eden,
> the summit of all blessings.[1]

Ephrem had begun this meditative hymn by comparing the Word of the Creator to the Rock which marched with the people of Israel in the Exodus; and he takes for granted the pauline typology (1 Cor 10, 4). With that profound mastery over scriptural imagery which shocks, dismays or irritates us in our own ignorance of and lack of reverence for the word of God, he goes on to tell us that he finds in these opening chapters of Genesis the bridge and the gate to Paradise. Robert Murray, in drawing our attention to Ephrem's contemplative method, cites his 'acrostic hymn which only gets as far as *Yod*, the initial letter of Jesus in Syriac', but which, even so, illustrates the fertility of the contemplative imagination, fixing its gaze on the Incarnate Word as the bridge:

Jesus, glorious name,
secret bridge which leads
across from death to life,
to you I have come and stopped,
at *yod* your letter I am held.
Be a bridge for my speech,
that it may cross to the truth.
Make your love a bridge for your servant:
by you let me cross to your Father.
Let me cross and say 'Blessed be he
who made his might gentle through his Child!'[2]

'The gate' Ephrem picks up again in the final strophe of the same hymn on Paradise (no 5), whose richness and economy suffice to tell us why he earned the soubriquet, 'harp of the Spirit':

Have pity on me,
O Lord of Paradise,
and if it is not possible for me
to enter your paradise,
allow me to pasture
outside, by its enclosure:
within is the table of the diligent,
but let the fruits of its enclosure
drop like crumbs outside,
so that through your grace
sinners may live (Brock, p 26).

As no less an authority than Irenée Hausherr has insisted, the Jesus Prayer not only had innumerable formulations in the East from the fourth century onwards, but it was centred predominantly in that complex of contemplative graces and affective responses encompassed by the greek word *penthos*, compunction.[3] Ephrem's is a marvellous example of it, certainly indicative of how and why compunction has been, from the very beginning, the foundation of monastic life and remains at the heart of its contemplative teaching. Ephrem first evokes the image of the crucified Christ and his dialogue with the repentant thief: 'Lord, remember me . . . today you shall be with me in Paradise' (Lk 23, 39-43). It was not possible for the great Moses himself, whom the Lord knew face to face, to enter the new Eden, the promised land, though he was given a sight of it (Num 34, 1-4. 10). But the word of the Lord, through the mouth of another prophet, is that he himself will rescue and pasture his sheep in good grazing ground on the outskirts of the new city, where the trees shall yield their fruit (Ezek 34, 11-16. 26-27); even as, through the grace of conversion, 'the sinner shall surely

live' (33, 16). Jesus himself is the 'gate of the sheepfold' (Jn 10, 7ff), and also the shepherd of the Psalm (23), who prepares the table of goodness and love, and extends his bounty and mercy beyond the house of Israel (Mt 15, 24-28) and its loyal remnant, the diligent and faithful servants (Mt 25, 21, 23). Inevitably in the contemplative setting, the enclosure is the garden, the Eden of the Song of Songs (Cant 4, 16), where the Beloved pastures his flock (6, 2-3). Compunction is expressive of that quality of relationship with Jesus which opens the gate to the joys of contemplation.

It would be näive of us to think that to pray like this is playing imaginative games which the words and phrases of the sacred books might conceivably bring to mind. Jean LeClercq, in his classic treatise on western monastic prayer and theology, points out that monastic exegesis essentially 'consists in explaining one verse by another verse in which the same word occurs'.[4] Equally, the *lectio divina* is an 'activity which begins with grammar [that is, the meditative analysis of the sacred text] and terminates in compunction, in the desire of heaven'; whilst Benedict's first degree of humility, the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom, is the experience of the presence of God.[5] There is a large measure of continuity here with the theological and scriptural tradition which Ephrem represents. 'The humility recommended', says Fr Robert Murray, 'is not abject, but simply acknowledges our position as creatures before our Creator. . . . Our images are weak and inadequate, yet have a certain validity because God has chosen to use them':

> See, every comparison — which is sketched and worked out,
> if it sufficed to depict — [its object with] perfection,
> would be found to be no figure — but reality itself.
> It is necessary that shadows — should pass away.
> From a net that wears out — and a seed-grain of summer
> Our Saviour for our sake — made parables of the kingdom.
>
> The insights of parables — are weak and inadequate,
> the outreach of images — is feeble and fails.
> [Yet] in their humble height — they stand to reproach
> him who is proud — and lifts himself up
> For if he is unable — to penetrate images,
> What madness to grasp at — the height of God's grandeur![6]

The 'Jesus prayer' of Ephrem which we cited above is clearly Eucharistic, as the following strophe from a hymn of his on the Nativity makes explicit:

> Blessed is the Shepherd, who became
> the Lamb for our atonement; [Cf Jn 1, 29; Apoc 5, 12; 7, 9-13]

> Blessed is the Vineshoot that became
> the Chalice for our Salvation . . . [Cf Jn 15, 1-8; Ps 115, 13].
> Blessed too is the Farmer, who became [Cf Mt 13, 3. 24-30]
> the Wheat which was sown
> and the Sheaf which was harvested.[7] [Cf Jn 4, 35-36; Ps 126, 6]

Not surprisingly then, compunction is equally the gateway to the fruitful celebration of the Eucharist. Ephrem repeatedly insists on reverent fear and love as the proper dispositions for approaching the Holy Sacrament. In his Commentary on the Gospel Harmony, he writes of Christ in the Upper Room:

> It is because of their love and fear that Christ's friends have another way of reaching him. As they partake of his sacramental body, they bring him once more to his Passion, if one may speak thus. May he come, then, to those who eat it, so as to consign their bodies to a passion joined with his, so that their passion may be the way to gladness, as he gladdened them through his own.[8]

François Graffin, citing from a hymn in the armenian collection —

> May love bring us, my brothers
> to this body given by our priest.
> May holy fear be on our lips
> When we receive this our life's remedy.
>
> In fear and in love
> let us come to life's remedy
> like people who understand.
> May our hearts succumb to his death
> May our souls yearn for his mystery —

remarks that these two dispositions, fear and love, cannot be separated in Ephrem, and that the middle ages concentrated too much on the sombre ascetic, who thundered about the last judgment.[9] Perhaps we might be allowed to quote one remarkable exception from the late medieval West, the style and rhythm of whose English seems so close to the Syriac across a thousand years:

> Love and fear are brethren,
> And they are rooted in us by the goodness of our Maker,
> And they shall never be taken from us without end.
> We have of kind [nature] to love, and we have of grace to love,
> And we have of kind to fear, and we have of grace to fear.

It belongs to the Lordship and to the Fatherhood to be feared,
And it belongs to the Goodness to be loved.
And it belongs to us that are his servants and children
To fear him for his Lordship and Fatherhood,
As it belongs to us to love him for his Goodness.
And though reverent fear and love are not both-in-one,
Neither of them may be had without the other.[10]

Strange as it may seem to the modern western Christian, who thinks of his Church according to the well-defined categories of hierarchy, laity and religious — with the latter divided for most into contemplative and active, Ephrem the deacon imbibed his monastic spirit from the successive pastors of the Church he served at Nisibis, the bishops James, Vologeses and Abraham. Thus in his eulogy of Vologeses, he lauds the bishop as blending harmoniously contemplation and pastoral activity: the virtues of gentleness and true knowledge of the self, spiritual poverty and chastity, with the freedom and discernment which must accompany such mastery of one's thoughts, speech and actions; and on the other hand, that ability to read the signs of the times and to adapt to contemporary needs. Ephrem sees his bishop as a true successor of the apostles, chosen by Jesus 'to be with him and sent by him to preach the kingdom' (Mk 3, 14). When, in the same Nisibene hymn, he sings the praises of bishop Abraham, the very name compels him to weave together the twofold image of the husband of Sarah and our father in the faith with that of Christ, the redeemer and husband of the Church:

You are indeed all that your name implies,
For you, too, are the father of a multitude. [Gen 17,48]
Yet Abraham had Sarah for wife,
Whereas you are without a wife:
It is your flock which is your bride.[11]

Here is the point of departure for Ephrem's own practice of the ascetical life, his understanding of the spirit of monasticism and his all-embracing reverence for consecrated virginity. In another Nisibene hymn, reflecting on the fruitfulness of the good seed of the parable (Mt 13, 8), he reckons that the thirtyfold is for ascetical living, the sixtyfold for charity, and the hundredfold for truth. Truth is at the heart of perfect charity, which does not exist without purity of intention, complete detachment and self-forgetfulness: and Ephrem's scriptural example is the widow's mite (Mt 12, 41-44).[12] Though he uses the term 'monk' of his bishops, this is not simply because they are celibates; it is primarily that the monk should be unworldly. In Vologeses, Ephrem praises his reserve and his sense of moderation, his *gravitas*; in the bishop James, his ascetical practices, his

simplicity and directness of speech. Yet for all this, Ephrem, still considers the anchorite as fulfilling the highest ideals of monastic life. The word that Christ would have spoken to the solitary is 'Where there is one of you, there am I', lest the hermit should fall into melancholy. 'Christ is indeed himself our joy, and he is with us'.[13]

The many strands of Ephrem's teaching on virginity, the fruits of his constant contemplation of the mysteries of Christ Incarnate, of Mary, the Holy Spirit and the Church, would ask for distinct and separate treatment. These two strophes on Cana, from a hymn on faith, may fittingly conclude our present consideration:

> Jesus, you are invited to the wedding-feast of others,
> here is your own pure and fair wedding-feast:
> gladden your rejuvenated people,
> For your guests too, O Lord, need
> Your songs: let your harp utter!
>
> The soul is your bride, the body your bridal chamber,
> Your guests are the senses and the thoughts.
> And if a single body is a wedding-feast for you,
> how great is your banquet for the whole Church.[14]

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NOTES

[1] From 'Hymns on Paradise', no 5, in S. Brock, *Harp of the Spirit*, pp 22-23.

[2] Robert Murray S.J., 'St Ephrem's Dialogue of Reason and Love', in *Sobornost*, vol 2, no 2 (1980), p 30.

[3] Irenée Hausherr S.J., *Noms du Christ et voies d'oraison* (Rome, 1960). There is a new english translation, *The Name of Jesus*, in the Cistercian Studies series (no 44 Kalamazoo, Michigan/Oxford, 1980).

[4] Jean LeClercq O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York, 1961), p 95.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp 83-95.

[6] *Hymns to Faith*, 42, 11-12: trans. R. Murray, *art. cit.*, pp 30-31.

[7] 3, 15. Cf Brock, *loc. cit.*, pp 14-15.

[8] *Ephrem de Nisibe, Commentaire de l'Evangile concordant ou Diatessaron*, ed. et trad. L. Leloir (*Sources Chrétiennes* 121, Paris 1966), p 389.

[9] François Graffin S.J., 'L'Eucharistic chez Ephrem', in *Parole de L'Orient IV*, nos 1 et 2 (*XVI^e centenaire de S. Ephrem*, 1973), p 112.

[10] Cf *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich* (critical ed. by Edmund Colledge O.S.A. and James Walsh S.J., Toronto, 1978), part 2, ch 74, pp 673-74 (slightly modernized). Julian received her revelations in May 1373; Ephrem died in June 373.

[11] Cf Louis Leloir O.S.B., 'L'actualité du message d'Ephrem', in *Parole de l'Orient, vol. cit.*, pp 57-60.

[12] *Ibid.*, p 66.

[13] *Ibid.*, p 66, citing the Commentary on the Gospel Harmony.

[14] Brock, *op. cit.*, p 19.