

A SPIRITUALITY OF CHANGE

By PETER STEELE

PLENTY OF PEOPLE KNOW THAT when medieval pilgrims got home – if they did – they brought with them the brandished or stitched insignia of palm or cockleshell. Having weathered many adversities, they had a token to show for it all, rather in the manner of the modern tourist's photographs or trinkets. What is less often mentioned is that some of these men and women had themselves tattooed with a pilgrim cross. I find this an engrossing gesture. It signals to me their sense that they were embarked on a more-than-episodic venture, an irrevocable pilgrimage. Sunburned, wrinkled, scarred by life's successive events, and now returned at last to their original communities, they had, inscribed in their flesh, the token of transmutation.

Because, after all, that is what the cross says within the Christian milieu. A colleague of mine used to refer contemptuously to the crucifix on the wall of my university office as 'that idol of yours'. He was a charmless individual, but he would have been right had the cross stood for our hitting the wall of death and staying spreadeagled against it. Why commemorate dead meat? By contrast, the summons and the promise of Christianity have to do with transformation, transfiguration – with primal and definitive shift. Jesus was merely the noisiest of history's buffoons unless his words and deeds engendered the changes they foreshadowed. Pilgrims who were pricked by his memory and re-traced by the token of alteration were agreeing to have the eternal word inked in on mutable flesh. In that, they were doing what every sacramental activity does: they were putting their bodies where their mouths were.

For that is what sacraments are about: our shifting selves, our shifting world. Admittedly, the makings of sacraments are often deployed as though they lacked all inherent dynamism: like most of our western contemporaries, we deal with matter as if it were not formidable, and could be shovelled about at our whim. There is not much excuse for this. We know that the sun is, in effect, a smouldering hydrogen bomb, and that we depend upon it at every instant for all that we have and are. We know that water is the amniotic fluid of all the earth's vitality, and that we re-enact its condition, each of us, in our flesh, so long as we are alive. We know that stardust falls in tons upon our frail planet every day; that if

a fly stamps on the table in front of us, this will have its tiny consequence in realms immeasurably distant; that in the minute canyons at our fingertips, cells blossom and fade, as they have done since we had a finger at all. We know it, but we rarely imagine what we know. If we did, we should be half-way to saluting those processes which sacraments address, effect and prefigure.

Sacraments do not proceed magically, which is just as well, since magic proceeds via contempt for those upon whom it is worked. They look, rather, to the actualities of those to whom they are offered – as offered they are, not foisted. Every sacrament, however celebrated within whatever Christian community, embraces transformation, and does so on the assumption that transformation is our *métier*. True, we can bid for ossification, but it is a bid rarely accepted, and even if it is, the gambit is temporary: the best of bones are still bones in transition. Baptism, or marriage, or reconciliation, or ordination, or any of the other sacraments, has as its dominant theme that since we are called to change – not merely doomed to do so – it is important to find ways of taking this to our hearts, and doing it ‘in the Lord’, whether as individuals, *à deux*, or in concert with humanity – and, indeed, with the universe at large.

Pilgrimage itself was often taken to be sacramental in the Middle Ages; certainly, it often mediated grace to the changing person in a changing world. Keeping roads and bridges in repair was praised, partly because this facilitated pilgrimage. For the direst sins and crimes, the penance could be to spend one’s life in perpetual pilgrimage, that quest being taken to be a reversal of the infernal descent. All this had a dark side, of course – fugitivity, the predations of bandits and innkeepers, and those grim armed pilgrimages, the Crusades. But what must have gripped the imagination of millions was the matching of the heart’s quest with the body’s venture, both of them under the aegis of heaven’s cruising Dove, and on the trail of a footslogging Christ.

Something of that cultural meaning – still to be found, of course, in the many who, without ostentation, go on pilgrimage today – is there in the Church’s naming itself officially, in our time, as being pilgrim at heart. Any term, as every poet knows, can fade overnight into being a mere tag, and that is true of ‘pilgrim people’, ‘pilgrim way’; but no more true of these than of other reverberant ecclesial expressions. The word limps, as did, no doubt, the footsore Word. Limping in turn can dispirit or unnerve, and language’s witchery is such that we can thereupon wonder whether the notion expressed remains authentic. Worse, perhaps, as we look at the knavish or foolish company trailing along, as in

Chaucer's time, behind the banner of pilgrimage, we can revert to alternative metaphors for our being, and our calling. Ramparts, stockades, isles of the blessed, suburbs of the sound – these can assert their enchantment.

I have the deepest sympathy for that tropism. Looking back at poems, articles, homilies, books, written in the last thirty or so years, I notice that the model of the motherland or the fatherland is perhaps the governing one. I have nothing but praise for 'nostalgia', understanding by that the etymological sense of 'the ache to be travelling home'. How could anyone who has spent the whole of adult life learning or teaching about literature at its most vital ignore the magisterial authority of *patria*, *Heimat*, *rodina*, the remembered and envisaged destination? Celebrating the eucharist daily, I know that I am doing this in fidelity to an ancient injunction, and in order to represent not only Calvary's moment but acts of love and knowledge which antedate the stars. Trying, in the face of formidable barbarities, to induct my students into an analogous love and knowledge of what is perpetually so, and is for their good, I hold up a tattered flag on behalf of things more treasurable, and ancient, than I can find words to say.

But I do not for a moment think that that stress should have the last word; I do not think that there should *be* a last word. Dante, picturing the pilgrim's arrival to be of God's company, says first that, there, the scattered leaves of the universe are gathered together into one volume, and then that he is near the Love that moves the sun and the other stars. But volumes are dynamic things, physically and otherwise, and to say that Love should wield the cosmos is to say that Love is vivacious and animating. With C. S. Lewis, I assume that to be in and of heaven is to be swayed into a perpetual voyaging – God-blessed, God-cherished, God-consolated, God-incited. What look this will have, after our disconcertingly brief lease on life in our present condition, I cannot begin to imagine, though Lewis's own contrasting of the bagged seed-wheat with the waving corn-field which it engenders does something for the wits. What I am certain of is that the germinal model tells a truth not only about our summoning in perpetuity, but about our best course from day to day. Had our Lord needed, like so many millions of his followers, to carry identification papers, '*homo viator*' would have appeared in them. It was he who was the primal pilgrim, he the primal quester. His bloodline can be seen in those who embrace the same style.

A little earlier, I spoke of the sacraments. If we think of the eucharist, that *chef-d'oeuvre* of sacraments, what we find is immense realism about actuality, good and bad, coupled with immense fascination with what

summons us. None of us has ever been to a eucharist which did not have at its heart a shocked stare at the betrayal, torture and execution of the Son of God. We did not always, nor perhaps usually, feel this; but that was what was going on. And in the same process, we were staring at the transmutation of all this, by the only competent power, namely love, into fertility, blessedness and boundless vitality. 'Superstition' is a feeble word for the witnessing, unless it was a true event; but granted that it was, how can we doubt that change is at the heart of our agenda?

Christians speak, sometimes, as if all the changing at issue had been done, and all that we need do were, so to speak, to coast on the Fish's back. 'Let him make what moves he knows to be good', so the feeling goes: 'we will either remain passive or foster the *status quo*. It is not for us to initiate moves.' Such a view though, seems to ignore the Lord's repeated metaphors of our intimate bonding with him, his drawing us all into the oceanic being of this Fathering God, his patterning our responsibility on his responsibility. I would be very surprised if anyone could establish from the parables of Christ that we should sit lightly to our present condition. I would be simply incredulous at the notion that 'the Son's Way', as Gerald Vann OP called it a long time ago, was a way of endorsed habituation. The way, the wayfarer, the co-travellers, the signposts, the staging-posts, the destination – all these enjoin, alas, *change*.

Why 'alas'? Ah well, *messieurs et mesdames*, speak for yourselves. I say, occasionally, to my students that any of them could make me angry within five minutes, and I could make any of them angry within five minutes. They immediately become angry at such a notion, which is confirming, in a sad sort of a way. What I have in mind is not some parlour-trick, but the notion that they should change their attitudes, their policies. The young, like the middle-aged and the old, generally speaking, hate real change. They like what might be called 'recreational change', as some speak of 'recreational sex': they like novelty, flourish, panache, innovatory display. They are, like almost all of us, natural applauders of interior decoration. They confuse chatter with conversation, novelty with alteration, clamour with challenge, *frisson* with transformation. Of the many thousands of university students I have taught so far, in allegedly free-style Australia, only a tiny minority have had any substantial zest for change – in themselves, of course. Nothing about my lesser knowledge of, say, England or the United States, suggests that the story is any different there. If accurate, such a notion should not be deployed merely to belabour the young. After all, if you went to Melbourne University, come and see me. Persuade me that, in the

sixties, you learned to invoke Proteus, and that you have kept faith with him.

Christianity, root and branch, is about change. John the Baptist destabilizes the *status quo*, and pays for it with his head, as, in our own century, the destabilizers of Nazism were often beheaded, and as, in El Salvador a few years ago Jesuits, with many others, had their committed brains blown away by the the defenders of the *status quo*. Jesus is vexatious precisely in so far as he incites a swerving from the habitual path of official, of religious luminary, of imperial occupier – but also of common citizen, and dedicated disciple, and the evangelists themselves. He has no minders, no surrogate sons, no snappers-up of morsels. His policy in ‘the public life’ has been edged, not rounded, and has been rich in entailments. The circumstances of Peter’s having the baton passed to him cannot have inflated his ego: who would trust Peter at a truly dark moment? The blessing offered the woman concerned in adultery saves her life, but still asks her to change. The tendering of John to Mary, and of Mary to John, at the foot of the cross’s dark bed, does not begin to suggest that life’s endeavours are over for either of them; put two such initiators together, and even the sky is not the limit.

And so it came to the cross – ‘that idol’, as my colleague would say. Alfred Rosenberg, drawing up the ‘Articles’ for the ‘National Reich Church’, in the filth of the Nazi Thirties, says in Article 30, ‘On the day of its foundation, the Christian Cross must be removed from all churches, cathedrals and chapels . . . and it must be superseded by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika’. This is true idolatry, as well as idiocy – even for a Nazi, Rosenberg was a remarkable fool – but it can throw into high relief the dreadful consequences of keeping the tokens of vitality frozen, and it can be a reminder of the value of their keeping their pulsations.

‘The only unconquerable symbol’ – can the man have been referring to the Constantinian ‘in this sign you shall conquer’, so often singled out as the token of Christianity’s disastrous triumphalism over the centuries? Whether or not he was, Rosenberg was party to the fantasy of the thousand-year Reich, a milieu in terror of change, and ready to terrorize those in league with change. As Jesus Christ hung on the cross erected by an earlier Reich, and was twisted into shapes of its choosing, he still contrived, in his Father’s name, to commission his hearers to bond themselves with one another for love’s own sake, and to support one another so that this fragile word should be sown near and far. Auden wrote a celebrated poem based on Brueghel’s *Fall of Icarus*. A Christian reading of the painting might esteem in it the diligent ploughman of the

word, while the heavenly one plunges towards his death. Even in such an interpretation, the ploughshare would be an emblem of change.

I think that one of the bedevilling things about Christian talk is that it has often been bullying – been the Bad News Bible, rather than the one it should be. Wherever we may ourselves be, we can often hector others. This, even when unalert, is odious; when it is witting, it is immoral: there is no such thing as justified bullying. Sometimes the auditors of that talk have been stampeded into new allegiances, and have in time found out either that their moves were justified or that they were at best superficial. Sometimes the auditors have been backed more and more emphatically up against some wall, and have grown narrow-eyed and timid in the conduct of their lives. Either way, we can after all, change – can alter the paradigm of our being, or modulate some of its details, phases, gestures. So far as the Word of the Lord is concerned, what has always to be remembered is that the Shaitan, the Bad-Mouth, the Enemy, is a terrorist. Joseph Brodsky, jeering creatively at the Leninist dictum about breaking eggs and making omelettes, says that ‘the omelette, though, makes me vomit’. Vomiting is a good idea when we find ourselves to be terrorized. It is a particularly good idea when we are terrorized, as the devil always wishes, by the prospect of change.

No human being has ever spoken or written definitively about that change-of-changes, death, but one of the signs of Christianity’s grown-up-ness has always been how good it has been at talking about our mortality. The shame-making glib chatter about death conducted by some Christian officials is endless, and the less of it preserved, except for purposes of reproach, the better. Still, any ‘spirituality of change’ which does not tackle ‘the big D’ is really whistling in the dark. Death always looks completely unpromising to those bent on a future, because it looks as if it does not have one. It is the counter-example to aspiration, the raspberry blown as the prizewinner puts out her hand. Love and death: they have gone on having their tainted waltz together so long, at least, as the western literatures have been making their way. But what I have to say is that it is only on condition that we face death’s imminence that we have any title to speak of addressing change. ‘Death’, wrote Wallace Stevens, ‘is the mother of beauty’; and whether or not he was right about that, death is the godmother of human truth. Unless we are schooled by her, we are illiterates.

It is because death spreads her wing over us that we shrink from change. Correctly, we intuit in every substantial shift the edge of the pruner’s knife. ‘Every time we say goodbye, I die a little’, the song says; goodbyes proliferate in our lives, farewells to persons, possessions,

conditions. And it is this state of affairs which is addressed by the sacraments. Each of them is a *rite de passage*. Each is an earnest that the fugitivity of the days and years is not, after all, fatality. Each says not only that there is a divinity that shapes our ends, but that all the cadences of our going are providential. Each is in its own way a celebration of the paschal mystery, in which securities are ceded and the ultimate security attained after all.

'A spirituality of change'? It seems to me that any authentic spirituality consists largely in one's letting it come home how things truly and deeply are, and responding out of that realization. A spirituality is less an ensemble of policies than a form of consciousness. Joseph Brodsky is fond of saying that his poems are all latent in the Russian language, so that what he does is foster them forth. The spiritualities of the saints are, in the same fashion, consensual: they minimize alienation from reality. And so it should go with any spirituality of change. Its worth would reside in its realism. Its watchwords would be the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, themselves the great celebrations of the proper relationship between actuality and potentiality. It would matter for no grander reason than that it was true.

And it, too, would be quite without magic. We are told that our Lord had to learn obedience by suffering, and every spirituality is a discipline of obedience, a keeping faith with one's call. Perhaps there are Apollonian and Dionysian personalities, the first welcoming stability and the second, change; but inside every flux-cherisher there are still skeletal rigidities, and we want very badly to keep some things as they are. Auden, as I read him thirty years ago, wrote that we like caricatures of our friends because this disguises from us the fact that they are mortal, and we like caricatures of our enemies, because this disguises the fact that they might repent, and we would have to forgive them. Leaving aside the moral alertness of Auden's remarks, I think of them again now, with the bittersweet experience of those decades inside me, colouring not only his sentences but also the self receiving them once more in memory. Friends have died or not, enemies have changed or not, but by the living God, and sometimes through the tolerated power of the Enemy, I am not the man who read Auden's sentences in the old arboreal days, and there is no way that I could be. I may, in the words of Randall Jarrell's 'Woman at the Washington Zoo' cry, 'Change me! Change me!', but one constant through all changes remains some fear at radical change.

Rounding off the day's prayer, the Church invites us to pray for a quiet night and a perfect end – something heartfelt, surely, millions of times throughout the centuries. The prayer can also be taken meta-

phorically, as addressing the long day of life itself: we can be looking to a fulfilment inevitably denied us this side of the grave. Well and good, no doubt, but this is not the definitive word as to how our attitudes are to be shaped while we are hereabouts. As David Jones put it, we 'are of the same world of sense with hairy ass and furry wolf and . . . presume to other and more radiant affinities': we are border-folk, being-straddlers. Those best pleased with human beings and those least pleased are agreed on this at least, that we are paradoxical. We are called to be 'unappeased and peregrine', and we are called to love the human condition. In both respects, we are '*cohaeredit et sodales*' of our Lord himself, the only human being to have loved this life, his life, our life, perfectly, the only non-alien, and the only one to have been able to be unconditionally committed to a Life not describable in the terms of this world. To be living 'in Christ' is, in some small measure, to be living out that paradox.

We do it, and always will, even in heaven, as amateurs. One can be a professional expert at all manner of things, but not at life. The wisest ninety-year-old that ever lived was still an amateur at being a ninety-year-old. The holiest of saints has, as part of his or her endowment, a gawkiness in holiness; indeed, they are prone to couch things more vehemently than that. Standing by us in this curious enterprise is, we believe, no one less than the Holy Spirit. It is very significant that in the Church's characterizing, and worship, of the Spirit, a tension is maintained between the language of mutability and the language of perpetuation. The Spirit is invoked as the one who will best spur us, and best sustain us; who chastens, and challenges; who is sinuous in life's shifts, and who harbours us home. It is to the Spirit that we attribute a good tranquillity, and a divine discontent. Good news, we believe, can come with either air, and can thereupon speak to our diverse needs. Taking the Christian way will mean staying as alert as may be to what the pluriform one says here, now, to me, and to us.

A few years ago, there was a vogue for books with titles like *Passages* and *The second journey* – works to do with life's embarkations and transitions. At present, there is an abundance of books which relate travels remarkable and unremarkable, and of studies of them. As it happens, both kinds of writing interest me a good deal. It would be good, though, to be able to say with all my heart that such an interest pales before concern with the greatest of authors, who is also the greatest of travellers. We shall see what the morrow brings, and what the Spirit has to say.