THE PASCHAL PERSPECTIVE

By PATRICK ROGERS

OUR WORLD moves forward in complex patterns. Turning endlessly in the immensity of space, it repeats the cosmic miracles of sunrise and sunset, of winter melting into spring, of death issuing into new life. The seeds of vegetation fall into the earth and appear to disintegrate; then, helped by moisture and warmth, they blossom into new and independent growth. Life pushes onward and upward, through repeated spirals of death and regeneration, of decline and renewal, in cycles which both resemble each other and yet are not identical. Rooted at the heart of this cosmic process, the christian community discerns the providential will of a personal God, guiding, sustaining and transforming according to an all-wise — though to us inscrutable — plan:

> O Lord, how wonderful are thy works;
> In wisdom hast thou made them all;
> Earth is full of thy creatures! (Ps 104, 24)

Within this broad optimistic perspective, shared with Israel and with all world-affirming religious currents, the christian community maintains a particular, hopeful outlook upon whatever is difficult, toilsome, frustrating, overpowering and mortal in life. These aspects at first appear absurd or 'scandalous', in so far as they seem to clash with God's goodness, or with his providential control over human lives; but faith interprets them instead as capable of integration into the crucifixion-cross of our Lord Jesus: yet concealing, like his, the offer and promise of a richer and permanent union with our Creator God. It is specifically into the negative, shadow-side of life that the paschal mystery offers a mode of meaningful perception, whereby not only painful experiences such as illness and struggle appear as a testing, purifying process, but death itself is illuminated as a gateway into life. This paschal perspective, already dimly grasped in the Old Testament, becomes a treasure-house of diversity and growth in the New. In fact, it is found to be at the heart of all authentic spirituality and liturgy in the christian community across the ages.

Israel's experience of purification

Our forefathers in the faith, the Jews, already had collective experience of the paschal process, but without ever quite accepting it as God's usual way of drawing them to himself. Their national history was chequered with disaster, with purification and re-birth. Liberated from the hard task-masters of Egypt, and purified of their rebellious selfishness in the wilderness of Sinai, they are re-born as God's special people at the mountain of the Covenant. A similar process, akin to dying and rising, again punctuates the era of the Judges and of the Kings, and is dramatically repeated at the Babylonian Exile when the nation was brought to its knees. This is followed by restoration accompanied by the promise of a new and interior covenant, written on the heart.

Thus, when Paul and other New Testament writers wish to illustrate the theme of paschal mystery, they can cite with ease from the pages of jewish scripture (1 Cor 10, 1ff; 2 Pet 2, 5-9). However, following nature's normal repugnance towards testing, sorrow and death, the israelite majority failed to read the divine pattern, as it linked humility with glory, death with resurrection. Indeed, when Jesus began to speak of his forthcoming death as a necessary step in fulfilling the divine pattern for christian salvation, Peter voiced the general opinion of Israel: God forbid that the Messiah should suffer or be in any way humiliated! The path of the suffering servant, who must give his life in ransom for many, was difficult for the jewish mind to accept. For Christians of every generation, its implications are more often evaded than integrated into our view of life.

Jesus's foreknowledge of his own paschal mystery

It is affirmed in all four gospels that Jesus embraced the paschal process in advance, as the means of achieving his purpose on earth: namely to seek and to save those who were lost (Lk 19, 7). We may well assume that he became aware of his future suffering only gradually, as he reflected on the progress of his ministry. It is Luke who tells us that Jesus advanced in wisdom as he advanced in years (Lk 2, 52); and there is no need to maintain that the painful climax of the Passion was in his view from the start of the journey. But with the passing of months and years, as the first enthusiasm of the crowd began to wane, our Lord must have pondered and prayed anew on the nature of his mission, until the conviction crystallized that it could be accomplished only through the sacrifice of his life. So we find his

series of predictions bearing upon the Passion. 'The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be betrayed, mocked, crucified and killed (cf Mk 8, 31; 9, 31ff; 10, 33ff; and parallels). Along with the explicit predictions, there are many implicit allusions pointing in the same direction: the Bridegroom's departure (Mk 2, 20), the 'baptism' and 'chalice' which loomed over him (Mk 10, 38); and the 'exodus' which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem (Lk 9, 31). Side by side with these passion-predictions, the gospels also record our Lord's confidence, based on prayerful union with the Father and on the previous history of God's faithful servants, that his death would issue into new and glorious life. Thus, his foreknowledge — according to the evangelists — included the prospect of Resurrection, and was fully paschal in its scope:

> Unless the grain fall into the earth and die, it will remain alone; but if it die, it bears much fruit (Jn 12, 24).

What is to be thought of all these paschal predictions attributed to Jesus? It may well be that in their clarity and detail they are the result of hindsight, as for instance the text of Mark, 10, 33ff, which reads like a summary of the sacred Passion. Yet there is very good reason to think that Jesus did in fact foresee and accept his sufferings before the event; and that, accordingly, he did his utmost to prepare the apostolic community to withstand this great crisis for their faith. Understanding his own redemptive role as that of the servant of Yahweh, the one who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (of Mk 10, 45), he would also envisage the glorious destiny that beckoned, once those sufferings were accomplished. He would know the text whereby Isaiah describes the ultimate vindication of the suffering Servant: 'His soul's anguish over, he shall see the light and be content. . . . For surrendering himself to death, he shall divide the spoil with the mighty' (Isai 53, 10-12).

Initial reactions: shock and disbelief

Despite such preparation, Jesus's community were dismayed and overwhelmed by the harsh reality of his Passion. Deserted by those closest to him, he must drink the bitter cup alone. The first two Gospels, at least, choose to highlight Christ's isolation during the Passion (Mt 27, 39ff; Mk 15, 29ff); although they interpret the flight of the disciples as a fulfilment of prophecy: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered' (Zech 13, 7; Mt 26, 31;

Mk 14, 27). On the other hand, Luke and John modify this theme by mentioning those few compassionate friends who stayed close to the Lord in his sufferings (Lk 22, 27; Jn 19, 26). Whichever version best represents the actual events of Good Friday, it remains that the majority of the disciples were bitterly scandalized by the Passion. Their perception of the paschal mystery, that is, of Christ's passage through death to new life, came after the event. Only through their experience of the Risen Lord did the paschal predictions of Jesus begin to make sense to them. Luke emphasizes this in his Easter narrative of the manifestation on the road to Emmaus: 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe. . . . Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things, and so enter into his glory?' (Lk 24, 27)

Growth of paschal awareness in the first christian communities

It would, however, be a mistake to imagine that the paschal mystery was at once appreciated, in all its depth and all its demands, by the followers of the Risen Christ during the privileged period of the easter manifestations. There was, instead, a real growth of awareness concerning this mystery, from the initial joy of resurrection-faith to the more profound reflections of Paul and John upon the bond between dying and rising. Admittedly, this process cannot be traced in detail, since the main lines of death-resurrection theology had already emerged in Paul's preaching before the earliest New Testament writings appeared; all of which are in turn interwoven with awareness of the Paschal Mystery. A few texts can be cited, however, to indicate that such a growth did take place.

The earliest christian preachers (as reported in Acts) were rather reticent in their estimation of the Passion. While interpreting our Lord's death as the result not merely of human injustice but of the mysterious Providence of God, their real emphasis was upon the Resurrection, as the glorious vindication of all that their Master had done, taught and been. Thus Peter declared that Jesus was 'delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God', and 'crucified by the hands of lawless men'; but then, 'God raised him up . . . for it was impossible for him to be held by death' (Acts 2, 24). And the remainder of his sermon is a call to faith, based on the Resurrection and Exaltation of Christ. At the very centre of their message is this witness to Christ, now gloriously living at the right hand of God (cf Acts 3, 15. 21; 4, 30; 5, 31; 10, 40ff). A very dramatic instance of such witness occurs in Acts 7, at the martyrdom of St

Stephen, who declared to his accusers: 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God' (Acts 7, 56). His dying prayer contains the hope of sharing in that life of glory: 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit'.

It is in the letters of St Paul that the *link* between dying and rising comes to really clear expression. Indeed, it may be said that the cornerstone of Paul's theology is precisely the paschal mystery realized in and through Jesus. Notice the emphatic sequence in his paschal hymn in the Letter to the Philippians: 'Christ became obedient even to the death on the Cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him, and given him the name that is above all names' (Phil 2, 8-9). Some have suggested that the Apostle was tacitly quoting a popular liturgy, just as in 1 Cor 15 he explicitly borrowed from the central tradition of the apostolic community: 'I delivered to you what I also received: that Christ died for our sins . . . that he was buried . . . that he was raised on the third day . . . and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve', etc. Still, it remains the particular hallmark of the pauline letters that he not only preached Christ as raised from the dead — for such was the common denominator of all early christian preaching — but also perceived an indissoluble link between the kind of death Christ died and the glorious life into which he arose.

If we ask why, in the pauline view, our Lord's death was so life-giving, first for himself and then for all who will share his resurrection, Paul's answer would be: precisely because of his total, self-emptying love, which knew no limits in obedience to the will of the Father. Paul sees the cross as a sacrifice offered because of love; that great desire to set men free from sin and enliven us with his own spirit, the very Spirit of God. This is nowhere stated so explicitly as it is in Romans 5, 6-8: 'While we were helpless, Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man. . . . But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us'. Yet the idea of Christ dying for us (on our behalf) is everywhere present in the epistles. And it is death of this kind, loving and self-giving, which issues in the resurrection.

The fourth Evangelist, writing long after Paul's martyrdom, and in the light of a lifetime's reflection on the paschal mystery from the midst of christian community, sees these points still more clearly. His version of the passion-prediction is cast in universal terms: 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (Jn 12, 24). St John interprets the events of Good Friday both as an act of love and as a Passover, as is

already stated in that pregnant verse which introduces the 'Book of Glory' (Jn chs 13-21): 'Now, before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end' (13, 1). John's account of the Passion (chs 18-19) is, accordingly, permeated with the conviction of Christ's unquenchable life and kingship. Death on the cross was but the moment of transition from this world, the return of the Word to the Father.

Personal participation in the paschal process

Thus far we have concentrated on the paschal mystery as it affected Jesus himself, who died and rose again. But this mystery in its turn becomes a process in which all the followers of Christ are involved. Every disciple must participate, personally, in the dying and rising of the Lord. This is the clear teaching of the Synoptics, of John, and especially of Paul.

If we first consider the Synoptics, we notice their general agreement upon Christ's words about cross-bearing, losing one's life, and self-renunciation on his behalf (Mt 16, 24ff; Mk 8, 34ff; Lk 9, 23ff); though it is remarkable how Luke, the evangelist of the Lord's mercy and compassion — *Scriba mansuetudinis Christi* (Dante) — is rather more thoroughgoing than Matthew and Mark on the question of self-denial. He makes Christ say: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross *daily* and follow me' (9, 23). Cross-bearing then becomes an everyday process, not one to be faced only in the crisis of eventual martyrdom. Similarly, Luke's report of the Master's teaching on detachment, simplicity of life and perseverance in discipleship seems more stark and total than that of Matthew (Lk 9, 57ff; Mt 8, 18ff). Despite difference in detail, the Synoptics agree upon the principle: those who wish to share with Christ in the future joy of the Kingdom must be prepared to drink with him the bitter chalice, and go with him through the baptism of suffering (Mk 10, 38ff).

The fourth evangelist reports the same teaching, although more briefly: 'He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life' (Jn 12, 25). In short, all four Gospels associate entry into future glory with a spirit of loving service and self-denial in this present life. 'If any one serves me', says Jesus, 'he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also' (Jn 12, 26).

At the same time, it is to Paul more than to any other New Testament author that we must look for the application of the paschal perspective to actual christian living. His practical theology (moral, sacramental and spiritual) all hinges upon our involvement in the dying and rising of Christ. This does not mean that Paul ignores other more universal theological ideas: creation, divine providence, and the upward movement of history towards its divinely-planned destiny. It is simply that the most characteristic feature of his theology remains his orientation of everything towards Christ crucified and risen.

Perhaps this becomes more understandable when we remember Paul's delight in contrasts. Just as in his own life-experience there came a crucial turning-point, after which those things that once seemed 'gain' to him were counted as 'mere refuse' for the sake of Christ (Phil 3, 7), so the whole pattern of his thought is marked by a similar contrast between 'then' and 'now', between the old Adam and the new (Rom 5, 12ff), the old leaven and the new (1 Cor 5, 7), the flesh and the Spirit (Gal 5, 16ff), slavery and freedom (Gal 5, 1), sinfulness and grace (Rom 3, 23ff): and, summing up all the other contrasts, between death and new life. So we find, for example, in Romans: 'To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' (Rom 8, 6); and again: 'The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 6, 23). Time and again, Paul spells out the way by which the Christian enters into new life: by 'dying' to self, to the old Adam, to the 'works of the flesh' and to all ungodly rebellion; and then by 'putting on Christ', living by his Spirit, walking in newness of life.

Sacramental community: paschal community

That process of dying and rising is sacramentally begun at christian baptism. 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead . . . we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom 6, 3ff). Entry into the paschal mystery is not, however, a once-for-all event, from which there could be no backsliding or betrayal Paul is realist enough to recognize that baptism only marks the beginning of a journey, and that the christian community, like Israel during the desert wanderings, has to maintain a constant struggle to live in accordance with the new life received (1 Cor 10, 6ff). Hence, side by side with ringing avowals of grace, there are many exhortations to live out the

paschal vocation: 'Do not yield your members to sin . . . but yield yourselves to God, as people who have been brought from death to life' (Rom 6, 13).

The Lord's supper also provides Christians with a vivid reminder of their paschal vocation; for, 'as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11, 26). Indeed, Paul urges an examination of conscience upon each communicant, not so much upon past sins as upon present attitudes towards Christ and the community. Whoever fails to recognize and cherish his neighbours as the beloved people for whom Christ died, cannot properly 'discern' the Eucharistic presence of Christ. To receive the sacrament in that state would be to 'eat and drink judgment upon himself' (1 Cor 11, 29). And elsewhere in the same epistle, the Corinthians are themselves called the Body of Christ (6, 15ff; 12, 12ff), and are therefore exhorted: 'You are not your own, you were dearly bought. So glorify God in your body' (6, 20). A similar thought underlies the warm appeal in Romans to 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship' (Rom 12, 1).

A major paschal reflection

Instead of merely multiplying texts, it will suffice to emphasize the most celebrated New Testament passage about life-long contact with the paschal mystery. This is in St Paul's highly personal letter to the Philippians, written during an imprisonment from which he could hardly hope to come out alive. In that situation he wrote: 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'. He encouraged his community at Philippi, who were themselves under some danger for the faith, to suffer for the sake of Christ, sharing in the same struggle as their apostle. In the second chapter we find the vibrant appeal: 'Have this mind among you which was also in Christ Jesus', followed by the paschal hymn about the self-emptying of Christ as Servant, even to death on a cross, and his glorious exaltation as Lord of heaven and earth (cf Phil 2, 5ff). The most celebrated chapter, however, is the third, which may be regarded as Paul's spiritual autobiography. It is important to notice how this exuberant text, while it makes great demands upon Christians, begins and ends on a clear note of joy. 'My brethren', he says, 'rejoice in the Lord' (3, 1). And with good reason, for 'We are citizens of heaven, and we eagerly wait for our Saviour . . . who will change our weak mortal bodies and make them

like his own glorious body, by that power in which he is able to subject all things to himself '(3, 20ff). Meanwhile, the struggle of life must go on.

Paul, the converted Jew, no longer expects salvation through the mere outward signs and observances which he had followed as a strict Pharisee, but rather through faithful communion with Jesus Christ and especially through 'fellowship in his sufferings'. Compared with this vital communion, nothing else matters. 'For his sake I have thrown everything away; I consider it all as mere refuse, so that I may gain Christ and be completely united with him' (3, 8). Then, the Apostle's burning ambition: 'All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death, in the hope that I myself will be raised from the dead' (3, 10ff). What Paul meant by 'sharing' or 'fellowship' in Christ's sufferings is to be discerned from elsewhere in the epistles. Only once is there mention of self-inflicted penance or mortification (1 Cor 9, 27), whereby the Apostle kept his body under control. Much more significant are the casual or 'occupational' difficulties involved in his apostolic vocation; the constant discipline of work, prayer and human relations; acceptance of the many hardships that his vocation brought with it: fatigue, misunderstanding and criticism (often from within the community), his own particular ailment (that mysterious 'thorn in the flesh' 2 Cor 12, 7), and all those persecutions and misfortunes which he lists in Second Corinthians (11, 23ff). And on top of that, a great solicitude and concern for his christian communities, a compassion which causes him to fill up in his own person 'whatever is lacking in Christ's sufferings, for the sake of his Body, the Church' (Col 1, 24).

Such communion with the cross of Christ, through loving faith and patient perseverance, is already cause for rejoicing in the Lord. It promotes a deep confidence that 'nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8, 39), and intensifies our belief that our true citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3, 20). Still, the ultimate entry into resurrection remains in the future, where it stands as the promised reward for those who press onward. On this point, Paul is both realist and enthusiast at once. For, having stated his ambition to share fully in the sorrows and in the glory of Christ, he adds: 'I do not claim, brethren, that I have already succeeded or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. No, I do not consider that I have already won the prize; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies

behind me and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal, for the prize of God's upward call in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3, 12-14). There is here a firm conviction that grace will not fail, that the seeds of resurrection are already sown within us, for Christ Jesus has made us his own; but there is also a clear realistic awareness of the conflict that is still involved for us in answering that 'upward call', which remains a 'fellowship with the sufferings of Christ'.

The paschal perspective: key propositions

Other ideas and images relevant to the paschal mystery could be assembled from elsewhere in the New Testament, and indeed from the Fathers of the Church. If we have concentrated on the gospels and on Paul's epistles, it is because these are the seminal or fundamental texts on which the rest depend, and to which they constantly return.

Now, by way of conclusion, we hazard some propositions in order to sum up what can be said about this major New Testament theme:

(a) The paschal mystery, the passage of Jesus Christ through obedient, sacrificial death into glorious, divine life, offers a positive perspective upon the whole of christian existence as a process of dying in order to rise again. It proclaims that the way to permanent union with God passes through humble service, dying to selfish ways, and obediently accepting the demands of discipleship.

(b) This way, opened up for us by Jesus himself, is both a gift and a challenge. It is challenge in so far as each must freely take up the share in the cross allotted to him; and gift in so far as Christ has already made us his own, giving us (through his Holy Spirit) the ability to follow his way.

(c) Baptism is a sacramental initiation into the paschal mystery, whereby we are immersed in Christ's death and rise with him to newness of life. The Holy Eucharist, too, proclaims this saving death and invites the faithful to share in his obedient, loving sacrifice.

(d) The fellowship of Christ's sufferings is a lifelong commitment for each Christian and for the community as a whole: We can and should interpret in this light all the problems, frustrations and limitations encountered along the way of discipleship.

(e) Already on the way, we enjoy a sure hope and security, which is a kind of first-fruits of the Resurrection. But the final prize of victory is reserved to the future, when Christ will come in judgment, and 'will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body' (Phil 3, 21), and 'God will be all to everyone' (1 Cor 15, 28).