

THE RISEN CHRIST

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OUR subject is not the Easter event itself which would defy any attempt to describe it. We shall meditate more on the time after Easter which precedes the Ascension and Pentecost. This is a time particularly rich in instruction. The ancient Church used to prepare catechumens for baptism during the whole of Lent. Baptism, the association with the death and resurrection of Christ, took place on Easter night. But the Church continued the instruction of the recently baptized in the time following Easter. Why? Certainly not because the pre-baptismal instruction was too short. Equally it was not entirely in order to remind the baptized that the Lenten effort should not be relaxed. The original reason was that the liturgical season provided an instruction proper to the newly baptized. The Church today, by emphasising the renewal of the baptismal promises on Easter night, invites us to listen with renewed interest to the post-Paschal message.

During the octave of Easter the Gospels at Mass are those of the appearances of Christ. The congregation is entirely composed of baptised persons. This corresponds fully to the spirit of the Gospel itself, for it is noticeable that Christ appeared only to those who already had the faith, as he had once obscurely foretold.¹ And the forty days which separate the Ascension from the Resurrection were a time in which Christ completed the formation of his apostles. The Church employs the same pedagogical method. To achieve her purpose she needs merely to have recourse to the Gospels which make us re-live the transformation which the risen Christ brought about in his apostles so that Christ may form us through his Gospel.

What was the transformation which the sight of the risen Christ worked in the apostles? The features of this change are sufficiently clear to be easily distinguished.

They now clearly understand the nature of the kingdom which Christ came to institute. It is principally of the kingdom that the risen Christ speaks to them after the Resurrection, 'throughout the course of forty days he had been appearing to them, and telling them about the Kingdom of God'.² And if the same narrative shows

¹ Lk 16,30.

² Acts 1,3.

us the apostles asking a little further on, 'Lord, dost thou mean to restore the dominion to Israel here and now?',¹ it is unlikely that they are then thinking purely and simply of the re-establishment of the Davidic royalty over the people of Israel. Christ is going to depart and they are thinking of his return, of his *Parousia*, for which they hope in the near future. And Christ does not deny the re-establishment; his reply concerns its date, 'It is not for you to know the times and seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority'.² The Passion destroyed once and for all any illusions which the apostles may have had. Christ is king, but his kingdom 'does not belong to this world'.³ In contrast we can recall the obsession with temporal triumph before the Passion and Resurrection; the apostles had intrigued to obtain official posts for themselves.⁴ When the crowd wanted to make Jesus its king after the multiplication of loaves,⁵ Christ with great delicacy sent away his apostles who were too attracted by the prospect, 'As soon as this was done, he prevailed upon his disciples to take ship'.⁶ When, by a grace from the Father, Peter discovers that Christ is indeed the Messiah,⁷ the idea of a human failure, of the suffering and death of this Messiah, appears incomprehensible to him.⁸ The triumphal acclamations of the entry into Jerusalem must have seemed to the disciples so modest as a Messianic fulfilment that they did not then connect this event with Zachary's prophecy.⁹ In short, their point of view was scarcely different from that of Satan at the time of the temptation.¹⁰

Would it therefore be true to say that before the Resurrection the apostles were inspired by a thirst for temporal power alone? Certainly not. But their thought was Jewish: God owes it to himself to manifest his glory in his holy city through his Messiah, and Israel will then draw all the nations to itself. Did not Jesus restrict his apostolate to the land of Israel, except for an occasional visit to pagan countries? And had he not said to the Chanaanite woman, 'My errand is only to the lost sheep that are of the house of Israel'?¹¹ When he drove the traders from the forecourt of the temple reserved to the Gentiles (it had to be used for something since the Gentiles did not become converted), did he not insinuate that, very soon, this temple, the Jewish temple, would be used for the Gentile proselytes, 'My house shall be known among all the nations for a house of prayer'?¹² The true significance of this gesture could become plain

¹ Acts 1,6.² Acts 1,7.³ Jn 18,36.⁴ Mk 10,37.⁵ Jn 6,15.⁶ Mk 6,45.⁷ Mk 8,29.⁸ Mk 8,32.⁹ Jn 12,16.¹⁰ Mk 8,33, cf. Mt 4,8.¹¹ Mt 15,24.¹² Isai 56,7, quoted in Mk 11,17.

to the apostles only after the Resurrection, as St. John expressly notes.¹ The cleansing of the temple foretells its destruction and replacement by the sanctuary of his body.

But at the Passion the Jewish people apostatised, 'We have no king, except Caesar'.² And it is a gentile who, immediately after Christ's death, is the first to recognise him for what he is, 'No doubt but this was the Son of God'.³ After the Resurrection the commandment to extend the proclamation of the Good News to the very ends of the earth is given clearly, 'Go out all over the world, and preach the Gospel to the whole of creation', 'You, therefore, must go out, making disciples of all nations'.⁴ The mission has now become catholic.

The apostles who had left all to follow Christ did have 'faith' in him before the Resurrection. St. Mark notes the holy fear which they experienced at the power of Christ, 'Why, who is this, who is obeyed even by the winds and the sea?'.⁵ In the name of the apostles Peter announces lasting attachment to Jesus, founded not only on the human attraction of friendship but on his mission as a prophet, 'Lord, to whom should we go? Thy words are the words of eternal life; we have learned to believe and are assured that thou art the Holy One of God',⁶ and even more than as prophet, as true Messiah, 'Thou art the Christ'.⁷ But it is not surprising that this faith in the person of Christ remains undeveloped, for while their attention is fixed on the Messianic office of Christ, Christ himself lets his person and his works speak for him. He calls himself only by the enigmatic title 'Son of Man'. Their faith remains so undeveloped that at the tragic moment of the Passion it is shaken. The apostles flee. And the true feelings of the apostolic community are to be found in the disillusioned words of the disciples on the way to Emmaus, 'We had hoped that it was he who was to deliver Israel'.⁸

After the Resurrection there is no longer any ambiguity. The shock of seeing the glorious wounds of Christ provokes from the unbelieving Thomas the cry of explicit faith, 'My Lord and my God',⁹ a profession so perfect that Jesus asks for no other from us, 'Jesus said to him, Thou hast learned to believe, Thomas, because thou hast seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet learned to believe'.¹⁰ The two other transformations depend on this deep-

¹ Jn 2,22.

² Jn 19,15.

³ Mk 15,39.

⁴ Mk 16,15.

⁵ Mt 28,19.

⁶ Mk 4,40.

⁷ Jn 6,69.

⁸ Mk 8,29.

⁹ Lk 24,21.

¹⁰ Jn 20,28.

¹¹ Jn 20,29.

ening of faith; if Jesus is truly God his kingdom is not of this world and his mission is universal. But does faith in Christ as God come from the Resurrection? St. John sums up the thought of the apostles in a phrase heavy with meaning, '... the Spirit had not yet been given to men, because Jesus had not yet been raised to glory'.¹

Indeed, is it not the mission of the Holy Spirit 'to guide into all truth'?² 'He who is to befriend you, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send on my account, will in his turn make everything plain, and recall to your minds everything I have said to you'.³ And at the Resurrection the apostles finally understand who their master is and the true nature of the kingdom. 'What he was from the first, what we have heard about him, what our own eyes have seen of him; what it was that met our gaze, and the touch of our hands', this was 'that Word, who is life'.⁴ Those who had lived the three years of their companionship with Jesus in the hope that the Messiah would reveal himself and be accepted by the Jewish people, suddenly discovered that the kingdom was among them and that they had misunderstood it. Each of his gestures and each of his words have a real and infinite value because they are the gestures and words of God in Person. Everything takes on a new meaning. Yet nothing is added by their faith to the reality of Christ. The Spirit however has enlightened their understanding. There is no need to look further than Christ for God, as Philip had wanted to do a short time ago, 'If you had learned to recognise me, you would have learned to recognise my Father, too. From now onwards you are to recognise him; you have seen me... whoever has seen me has seen the Father; what dost thou mean by saying, Let us see the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?'.⁵ Thanks to the Resurrection everything that occurred beforehand becomes so important in the eyes of the apostles. And if the Gospel accounts are not merely a biography of Jesus, they are none the less also the fruit of the immense strength of the desire to remember precisely the gestures and words of the Son of God during his earthly life.⁶

But the apostles could not remain absorbed in the past. It was not only to Christ as he lived that attachment was necessary, but much more to Christ now living. If the risen Christ wants to meet his disciples again in Galilee where he had first called them,⁷ it is not

¹ Jn 7,39.

² Jn 16,13.

³ Jn 14,26.

⁴ 1 Jn 1,1.

⁵ Jn 14,7-10.

⁶ Lk 1,3.

⁷ Mt 28,10 and 16.

merely in order to begin again exactly as before. Mary Magdalen discovers this. She has scarcely found her master again before she wants to detain him as formerly, to put herself at his feet and listen to him. But Christ sends her away and gives her a new mission.¹ This, too, is the touching lesson of the incident at Emmaus, 'And then, when he sat down at table with them he took bread and blessed and broke it, and offered it to them; whereupon their eyes were opened, and they recognised him; and . . . he disappeared from their sight'.² Was this cruelty on Christ's part? Not cruelty, but education in faith. 'Christ according to the flesh'³ is dead. He who now lives is 'Christ according to the spirit'. Not that his body is not alive, since his appearances show that it is. But his body now lets the divine glory appear in it. It is no longer subject to the limitations which belong to our unglorified bodies. He appears where and when he wishes. As a result, his action has a range which belongs to no-one else. The engagement to die, renewed at the Last Supper, is also the promise of the presence of his Body and his Blood throughout the universe.

Christ, taken away from our earthly eyes, becomes the object of universal faith. Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, the places where Jesus preached are but the beginnings of a mission which will go 'to the ends of the earth'.⁴ The Resurrection will extend the presence of Christ and make it effectively catholic. The desire to fix one's attention exclusively on the historical past of Christ would be an evasion from the very movement of the Spirit of Christ, and from faith in the Resurrection.

In the Spirit, faith in the mystery of the Resurrection, in Christ living though hidden from our eyes, is not a depressing thing. On the contrary, it gives birth to hope. When Christ compares us to the apostle Thomas, it is to our advantage, 'Thou hast learned to believe because thou hast seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have learned to believe'.⁵ But one can notice with St. Augustine that Thomas himself, in saying 'My Lord and my God', believed what he did not see; for he did not see Christ's divinity with bodily eyes. Faith is not the product of flesh and blood but comes from the Father through the Spirit who has been given to us. And it is because the Spirit of Christ himself dwells in their hearts that the apostles will be capable of giving witness to the life of the risen Christ. There is no danger of their anchoring themselves

¹ Jn 20,17. ² Lk 24,30-1. ³ 2 Cor 5,16. ⁴ Acts 1,8. ⁵ Jn 20,29.

in the merely literal interpretation of the words of Christ. They will not copy the material gestures of Christ. To do so would be inept and inefficacious, for 'Believe me when I tell you this; the man who has learned to believe in me will be able to do what I do; nay, he will be able to greater things yet. It is to my Father I am going'.¹ The Good News will be present by the witness of the Church of the apostles. In each new situation, in the new problems which will arise in time and space, the Church will provide the authentic solution in the Spirit of Christ. Under the Spirit's watchful eye the Church preserves the deposit of faith and correctly interprets the words and gestures of Christ. In each generation the Spirit will raise up genuine saints to show others how the Christian life shapes itself before new duties and new demands. It is, in short, the Spirit who will gather men of good will together in the Church of Christ, Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit will be the missionary soul of the Church.

It is not therefore surprising that Christ devotes the greater part of the 'time after Easter' not to dwelling on the past but to the tasks of the Church in the future. He communicates to his apostles the power of forgiving sins;² gives them the mission to baptize,³ confirms Peter in his role as head of the Church⁴ and prepares his disciples for the great outpouring of the Spirit which is Pentecost.⁵ 'Throughout the course of forty days he had been appearing to them, and telling them about the kingdom of God'.⁶ Is this kingdom not the Church, this Church with its small beginnings like the little mustard seed, but which is destined to develop endlessly to become the great tree on which the birds settle?

It is charity which specially illuminates all the scenes of Christ's appearances. The delicate tenderness of Christ in these pages of the Gospel has been described so often that it is superfluous to insist on it. Nothing is missing from the progressive preparation for the revelation of himself in glory. To the pilgrims of Emmaus he comes as a companion on the road, to Mary Magdalen as a gardener. Elsewhere angels inform the holy women. What simplicity the renewal of this intimate dialogue contains: a gesture, his ordinary way of breaking bread, is enough for the pilgrims of Emmaus, an inflexion of the voice in his words to Mary, a sign from far off to the fishermen on the lake and John recognizes that it is the Lord. But if necessary he will eat with them and invite them to touch his wounds. What

¹ Jn 14,12-13.

² Jn 20,22.

³ Mt 28, 16.

⁴ Jn 21,17.

⁵ Acts 1,8.

⁶ Acts 1,3.

gentleness in the pardoning of Peter, by allusion, in the threefold invitation to love. How near he is even in his glory. This divine love of him, who has given the greatest proof of love which there is in giving his life for us, is fully human. 'Christ, during his earthly life, offered prayer and entreaty to the God who could save him from death, not without a piercing cry, not without tears; yet with such piety as won him a hearing. Son of God though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering'.¹ Mysteriously the full extent of the love of Christ appeared only on the Cross, measure of the height, of the depth, of the length and the breadth of his love.

The admirable capacity for adaptation of Christ's love can also be meditated at length. Mary the contemplative is sent back to activity and Christ refuses to tarry. But, for the effervescent Thomas, there is on the other hand an invitation to preserve in his very senses the memory of the wounds of Christ. Jesus takes Peter aside and Peter should not bother about John. To each his own way. The love of the risen Christ evokes and stabilises the personal vocation of each one.

Christ did not wish to disappear from the sight of the apostles without leaving them this deep experience. Love one another as I have loved you. To put this commandment of Christ into practice it will always be necessary for Christians to return at length to this privileged manifestation of the risen Christ to his own.

But the contemplation of the attitude of the disciples in these scenes remains the contemplation of the charity of Christ. It is remarkable to what extent they are truly animated by the Spirit of Christ. It is because charity is so alive in them that a word, a gesture, can be enough to recognize the much-loved master. After Christ's appearance it is charity which sends the pilgrims rushing to the apostles assembled in the Supper room. It is charity which is satisfied by the presence of the unknown person on the shore without making him announce his identity 'for they knew well that it was the Lord'.² It is charity again that the holy women should find nothing unusual about their being sent as messengers to the apostles, the officials of the Church. Charity too sent Peter and John rushing to the tomb on the information of those who had seen the risen Christ before them.³ The joyous love of the same Christ draws together and welds into one the different elements of this Church which had threatened to disintegrate at the Passion. Christ is henceforward

¹ Heb 5,7-8.

² Jn 21,12.

³ Jn 20,1-10.

living in them, present in them. They have now received his Spirit. Christ can now say 'I am with you until the consummation of the world'.¹ Christ ascended to the Father is Christ present in his Church, by the Spirit he has communicated to her. The contemplation of the risen Christ is inseparable from the contemplation of the Christian life of the apostles and of the apostolic Church. It is the same Christ who is adored in heaven and on earth. It can be said that heaven is brought back to earth, since now the Spirit of Christ lives in our hearts, or that heart is taken up to heaven, because he has taken us in his Spirit. The love of God and the love of our neighbour are truly a single commandment.

All that is true in faith, and in the measure in which we live in faith. And that is why in the sacrament of his Presence, in the Eucharist, our presence before Christ is inseparable from our presence before the Church. To become one with the body of Christ is to increase the mystical unity with one another in his Church.

But this is only true in faith. The great visible gathering together of Christ and his Church will occur only at the end of time, when the heavenly Jerusalem descends to earth and when the earth and the heavens pass to glory; when Christ descends to us and we ascend to him.

While we wait we should grow in faith, in hope and in charity, allowing ourselves to be always more filled with his Spirit, working always more actively at the mission confided to us.

The apostles' concern to describe so exactly the transformation which the risen Christ worked in them is not inspired by any desire to write their autobiographies. They were unable to act otherwise. It is impossible to speak of the Resurrection without at the same time describing the effects produced in the hearts of believers, because the Resurrection is precisely the manifestation of the Power and the Glory of Christ, the outpouring of his Spirit. The Resurrection inaugurates a new life of faith, hope and charity. In its light all that precedes appears only as a preparation.

For us twentieth-century Christians there is no longer any need for the risen Christ to appear to us. But our interior renewal is none the less the work of the risen Christ, sacramentally, through the mediation of the Church. This is the meaning of the sacrament of baptism. St. Paul continually reminds us, 'In Christ the whole plenitude of deity is embodied, and dwells in him, and it is in him

¹ Mt 28,20.

that you find your completion . . . you, by baptism, have been united with his burial, united, too, with his resurrection, through your faith in that exercise of power by which God raised him from the dead'.¹ 'You know well enough that we who were taken up into Christ by baptism have been taken up, all of us, into his death. In our baptism we have been buried with him, died like him, that so, just as Christ was raised up by his Father's power from the dead, we too might live and move in a new kind of existence'.² We are born anew of water and the Spirit,³ of that Spirit which cries in us 'Abba, Father',⁴ 'through faith in Jesus Christ you are all now God's sons. All you who have been baptised in Christ's name have put on the person of Christ'.⁵

That is why the Church completes the instruction of the newly baptized. She still speaks to them of Christ, but this message has a new depth because it is received in the Spirit of the risen Christ himself. Rightly understood, it is the same, essentially, for those who have long been baptized. For them Easter is the occasion of the renewal of the baptismal promises, of a greater fidelity to the Spirit received in baptism. 'Since we live by the Spirit, let the Spirit be our rule of life'.⁶

But there is a further meaning, and not the least important, to be found in this time after Easter. If Christ is with us, in us, he will lead us along the same path he himself has travelled. We, too, 'must die before entering into glory'⁷ because the servant is not greater than the master. Faith in the Resurrection is inseparable from that engagement.

At the highest, this means martyrdom, the supreme testimony of the life in us of one who is greater than ourselves. The risen Christ insisted on reminding Peter at his appearance on the lake-side. 'Believe me when I tell thee this; as a young man, thou wouldst gird thyself and walk where thou hadst the will to go, but when thou hast grown old, another shall gird thee, and carry thee where thou goest, not of thy own will. So much he told him', St. John notes, 'prophesying the death by which he was to glorify God'.⁸

Not all Christians are called to the martyrdom of blood. All are called to the spiritual combat, to work at the redemption of the world. This is the great message of the Apocalypse with which revelation comes to its close.

¹ Col 2,9 and 13.

² Rom 6,3-4.

³ Jn 3,4.

⁴ Gal 4,6.

⁵ Gal 3,26-7.

⁶ Gal 5,25.

⁷ Cf. Lk 24,26.

⁸ Jn 21,18-19.

The risen Christ makes us discover little by little a last, more mysterious, form of his presence. This is the special lesson of the last appearance of the glorious Christ to the last of the apostles, to Paul on the road to Damascus, 'I am Jesus, whom you persecute'.¹ This was what Pascal was thinking of when he wrote 'Christ is in agony until the end of the world'.

On the Cross Jesus took on himself all the sins of the world and all human suffering. The life of Christ within us urges us in the same way, 'Lord, when was it that we saw thee hungry, and fed thee, or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When was it that we saw thee a stranger, and brought thee home, or naked, and clothed thee? When was it that we saw thee sick or in prison and came to thee? And the King will answer them, Believe me, when you did it to one of the least of my brethren here, you did it to me'.²

In this the time after Easter differs from the final *Parousia*. The time of grace, it is not yet the time of glory. The glorious Christ sends us back to the suffering of his Body. 'One who claims to dwell in him must needs live and move as he lived and moved. Beloved, I am not sending you a new commandment; it is an old commandment, which you were given from the very first; what was the message to which you listened long ago but this same commandment, now grown old? And yet it is a new commandment'.³ This sublime stammer is understood by the baptized after Easter thanks to the witness of the Spirit and to the teaching of the Church. It is in order to live this commandment which is new and yet old that the baptized continue to come to associate themselves with the unique sacrifice of Christ and of his Church, the Mass.

On the other hand, there is no better way in which the Church can testify to the life of the risen Christ than by the presence of its baptized members. It is they who, generation after generation, constitute the Kingdom which Christ came to establish on earth, a Kingdom which knows no limit in space or time. Is it not for them that she offers her sacrifice, in union with that of her Head, so that he may be ever more and more alive in them?

The Church looks upon the baptized gathered together in Christ who lives among them and in them. And the baptized turn their eyes towards the Church from whom they receive the 'Bread which has come down from heaven'. But this mutual regard does not blind their eyes to all else. The same Spirit is already at work in the heart

¹ Acts 9,5.

² Mt 25,37-41.

³ 1 Jn 2,7-8.

of every man who comes into this world. They, too, are called. At the time of Pentecost, it is to them that the whole Church will turn, renewed by her contemplation of the risen Christ, and imploring the Spirit to make her always more capable of the mission entrusted to her by the risen Christ.