

CHRIST, THE AMEN OF GOD

By JOHN WRIGHT

IN THE DIALOGUE between God and man which constitutes salvation history God has the last word, the finally efficacious word, and that word is Christ. He is God's promise fulfilled, God's covenant established, God's merciful judgement irrevocably passed upon human history. He is the concrete realization of God's purposes already present in the world.

St Paul on one occasion was explaining to the corinthians a change he had made in his previously announced plan to visit them. He wanted to avoid a charge of fickleness for this change. They were apt to think that he was saying Yes and No in the same breath. So he appealed first of all to the fidelity of the God he preached and worshipped as evidence that this was not the case. God's faithfulness (the source and ground of Paul's constancy) is unmistakably revealed in Christ, who is only Yes, not Yes and No. Everything that God has planned and promised finds its full, definitive affirmation in Christ.¹ It is this inspired aside of St Paul that gives us the governing insight into the title of Christ, Amen, actually applied to him in the Apocalypse.²

God's loving initiative

Salvation history begins in the eternal graciousness of God. By his loving initiative, prior to the merits and even the existence of all created beings, he determined to constitute a heavenly city, a society of created persons freely joined to him and to one another in unending vision, love and joy. He is Lord of history precisely because he powerfully directs all happenings somehow to the realization of this merciful design. Both for mankind as a whole and for each individual it is always God who begins the dialogue that leads to salvation. He offers his loving invitation to all to share in the abundant riches of his life. This initiative of God already contains within itself the guarantee of its realization. For he is Lord.

¹ Cf 2 Cor 1, 15-22.

² Apoc 3, 18.

But God does not constitute the heavenly city in the same way that he creates light, by a simple *fiat*: 'Let it be made!' This result depends also upon the free response of obedience and love on the part of his creatures. It will be the product of their tears and their toil, of their struggle and their creative endeavour, as well as of his power and wisdom and love. But created persons are inescapably frail. Within the sphere of their free activity there is always the possibility of failure and defect. No inexhaustible source of life and goodness belongs to the finite world to guarantee its progress toward the goal.

To remove this inner uncertainty and unreliability without injury to the freedom and dignity of his creation, God has, as St Paul teaches, chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world.¹ The incarnation is the eternally decreed, infallible support of the divine purpose in creation. From the beginning the divine intention which rules the course of history looks to Christ. The heavenly city will be the body of Christ.

The dialogue begun

Man's initial response to the divine initiative was refusal. Human frailty bore fruit in human selfishness and pride. The possibility of failure inseparable from created liberty became fact in the primal disobedience of man. In his power of self-determination he affirmed an illusory self-sufficiency and turned the direction of his life away from God to purposes of his own. And since he refused to accept the fulness of life in loving submission to God, he set himself on the path to death, the path of everlasting separation from the living God. This was Adam's legacy to his offspring, the whole of the human race. This refusal continued to echo in the daily personal refusals of individual men. 'Sin came into the world through one man', St Paul tells us, 'and through sin, death. And thus death spread to all men inasmuch as all sinned'.² Earlier he had affirmed, 'All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God'.³ In these sins men made their own the rebellious attitude of the first man.

God's basic answer to man's sinfulness is Christ, an inner source of life and renewal within fallen humanity. This answer was planned in the eternity of God's wisdom which orders all things well; and a long period of preparation was necessary for man to

¹ Cf Eph 1, 4.

² Rom 5, 12.

³ Rom 3, 23.

understand this answer and be willing to accept it. The New Testament writers constantly manifest their awareness of standing at the end of centuries of waiting and preparation. They speak often of the fulfilment of scripture and the realization of types; substance has succeeded shadow. Amongst these many statements five themes stand out as being of special importance: the promise to Abraham, the covenant at Sinai, the promise to David, the suffering Servant, and the Son of Man. These themes are introduced into the history of the chosen people at intervals of three or four centuries, serving to revive their hopes and fix their confidence on the enduring faithfulness of God.

Son of Abraham

After the first fall darkness settled over the world. The eight chapters of Genesis between the account of the fall and the call of Abraham have been called a history of the reign of sin.¹ The murder of Abel, the sinfulness that provoked the flood, the impiety of Ham, the pride of the builders of Babel, all illustrate man's wickedness after he had turned from God.

Then came God's word to Abraham, a word of invitation and of promise, the first certain indication of a way out of the surrounding darkness into the light. God called Abraham away from the familiar sights of his homeland and promised him abundance of land and offspring. But his promise looked also to an indefinite future, when the blessing to be conferred on Abraham should spread to the whole earth: 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'.²

God's promise to Abraham has a unilateral quality. It depends for its fulfilment not on man's cooperation and industry, but upon the power and faithfulness of God. Man, indeed, must respond in faith to God's mercy in order to share in it, but this is not a response which earns a reward but which accepts a gift. St Paul, commenting on the text of Genesis, 'Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as justice',³ showed that this justice, this state of being right with God, came to him as God's favour, not as his wages: 'Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a favour, but as his due. But to one who does not work, but believes in him who makes the sinner just, his faith is credited to him as justice'.⁴ This promise meant that no matter how far humanity might stray from God in the pursuit of false goals of happiness, in the end

¹ Gen 3-11.

² Gen 12, 3.

³ Gen 15, 6.

⁴ Rom 4, 4-5.

God's mercy would prevail. He had promised.

The New Testament is deeply aware of the fulfilment of this promise. St Matthew shows this by beginning his gospel with a genealogy of Christ, calling him the Son of Abraham and tracing his descent from the first father of the hebrew people.¹ Mary bearing Christ in her womb sings her exultant canticle of gratitude to God for his mercy, and she singles out for special mention his faithfulness to the promise given to Abraham: 'He has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, as he spoke to Abraham and to his descendants forever'.² Zachary, father of John the Baptist, when he celebrates in song the birth of his son and anticipates the appearance of the Redeemer, also blesses God for remembering 'His holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham . . .'.³ And St Paul explicitly links the promise to Abraham with Christ: 'Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings", referring to many; but referring to one, "And to your offspring", which is Christ'.⁴ The faithful promise of God held true for over one thousand seven hundred years to find fulfilment in Christ.

The new covenant

About four hundred years after the promise to Abraham, God once again intervened in history to establish a new phase of preparation for the coming of Christ. The descendants of Abraham were in slavery in Egypt, and God sent Moses to lead them out to freedom in spite of the resolute opposition of Pharaoh. Moses accomplished this through the powerful assistance of God, and he brought the people, as he was directed, to Mount Sinai. There God entered into an alliance with them, so that they would be his people and he would be their God.⁵ It was this alliance that gave them a sense of unity as a people, joined to one another in their allegiance to God who had saved them. This covenant differed from that made with Abraham in that it was made with the people as a whole, not simply with a patriarchal head, and its effectiveness was conditioned by their loyal fulfilment of the obligations of the covenant, summed up in the ten commandments.

Thus it happened that despite the power of the covenant to draw the people together and to renew their national purpose in times of

¹ Mt 1, 1-17.

⁴ Gal 3, 16.

² Lk 1, 54-55.

⁵ Cf Exod 19-20; Deut 5.

³ Lk 1, 72-73.

distress, their repeated infidelities often made the covenant void and ineffectual. At length they found themselves split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north, and Judah in the south. First the northern kingdom then the southern was overwhelmed by their powerful enemies. At this point the prophet Jeremiah foretold a new and enduring covenant, one that God would inscribe in the hearts of his people, communicating to them an intimate knowledge of himself and the forgiveness of their sins.¹ Ezechiel and second Isaiah also spoke of this covenant to come that would establish an unbreakable union between God and Israel.²

The covenant prepared for Christ in two ways, one negative, the other positive. Negatively, it made clear their sinfulness and disloyalty and their great need of divine salvation. Positively, it formed a people united in their faith in God and their commitment to follow him, looking forward in faith and hope to a new covenant with him. Our Lord then fulfilled this preparation by establishing the new covenant in his blood: 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'.³ The Epistle to the Hebrews quotes at length Jeremiah's prophecy and affirms its realization in Christ.⁴ For in this saving act, he led his people out of the slavery of sin and death into the freedom of the sons of God and bound them to God in himself. He established a new Israel, whose permanence was guaranteed not by their self-originated loyalty but by his love. The gracious gift of enduring union with God, which could not be achieved through the law of the old covenant, became a present reality through the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ.

Son of David

Nearly three centuries after the forming of the covenant a prophetic oracle caused the hope of Israel for the future to centre especially in the house of David. After the people had taken possession of Canaan and the scattered tribes had been united into a single kingdom under Saul, David was chosen by God as king and shepherd of his people. David determined to build a temple to God in Jerusalem, his new national capital. But God through the prophet Nathan told David that it was not he but his son Solomon who would build the temple; and at the same time he promised David that the throne

¹ Jer 31, 31-34.

² Cf Ezek 34, 25; Isai 55, 3.

³ Mt 26, 27.

⁴ Heb 8, 6-13.

of Israel would be the everlasting possession of his descendants.¹

From this point on the people's hope for God's future blessing came more and more to envisage a concrete individual, a king of David's line, through whom peace, prosperity, and victory over their enemies would be gained. Later, nearly three centuries after the promise was given to David, as Judah lay threatened by attack, Isaiah foretold the birth of a child, a son who would bear the government upon his shoulders and receive titles of extraordinary dignity: Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. This child would sit on the throne of David henceforth and forever.² After Isaiah, in the dark hours of the babylonian exile, Ezekiel encouraged the jews with the prophecy of a davidic king who would shepherd the people of God in peace and plenty.³ Many psalms also recall the promise of God to David, expressing confident hope even in desolation and defeat, that God would bless and protect them through a davidic king.⁴

The infancy gospels of both Matthew and Luke make clear the realization of this promise in Christ. The angel at the annunciation tells Mary that God will give her son the throne of David his father and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever.⁵ The Magi are sent to look for the new born king in Bethlehem, the city of David.⁶ Later, at his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the jewish children acclaim him as the Son of David. The pharisees protest strongly to Jesus. But he replied, 'Have you never read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise'?⁷ 'If these kept silent, even the very stones would cry out'.⁸ St Paul likewise is careful to note that Christ is descended from David according to the flesh.⁹

Servant of Yahweh

As the redemptive plan of God assumed more definite lines, a mysterious personage appeared in the prophetic songs of second Isaiah, composed just before the release of the jews from Babylon in the second half of the sixth century B.C.: the servant of Yahweh. Many in the history of the chosen people had been called a servant of God, and in this part of Isaiah the people of Israel as a whole are spoken of as God's servant. But this person is spoken of in contrast to Israel, who look on and contemplate him.¹⁰ This servant

¹ 2 Sam 7, 4-17.

² Isai 9, 6-7.

³ Ezek 34, 23-24.

⁴ Cf Ps 77, 88, 131.

⁵ Lk 1, 32-33.

⁶ Mt 2, 1-8.

⁷ Mt 21, 16.

⁸ Lk 19, 40.

⁹ Rom 1, 3.

¹⁰ Cf Isai 49, 5-6; 53, 2-3.

of Yahweh is to be filled with the holy Spirit and to teach the gentiles – ideas which had some precedent in hebrew thought; but in the fourth of these songs a note is struck for which no clear parallel is discoverable in any earlier revelation of God's plan. The servant of Yahweh is to undergo suffering and finally death. In doing this he will bear the sins of others, and bring about their purification. His death will in fact be a sacrificial offering to God; and as the fruit of his toil he will see a numerous offspring and be exalted.¹ This element of vicarious atonement followed by triumph manifests a depth and value to suffering that is unique in the Old Testament. Suffering is often mentioned as a punishment for sin, sometimes even for the sins of one's forebears; and in the case of Job suffering was a proof of his faithfulness to God. But nowhere is there mention of a just man who atones for the sins of others in his own freely accepted endurance of suffering and death. The fourth servant song in its isaian setting looked forward to a totally righteous and sinless one whose gentleness and submission in the midst of undeserved torments would heal the sickness unto death of sinful men.

Every layer of New Testament writing identifies this servant of Yahweh with Christ, especially in his work of rescuing mankind from their sins. Explicit citations of the fourth servant song number nearly a dozen,² and there are many other clear references to the passage. The understanding of Christ as the servant helped christian thought chiefly in two ways. In the first place it enabled the apostles and the first followers of Christ to recover from the shattering experience of his suffering and death. Even the resurrection alone would not have removed their bewilderment. The prophecy of the suffering servant assured them that God's plan had not been compromised by the introduction of an unforeseen and alien element. At first they were not sure how Christ's suffering and death fitted into the picture; but the fact that they did was clear. And they could preach this to the jews with full confidence.³

As time went on the passage in Isaiah helped them also to penetrate the meaning of Christ's death as a sacrifice of expiation, a deed of heroic love and obedience that won for him the glory of his resurrection and his exaltation to the right hand of the Father.

¹ Isai 52, 13 – 53, 12.

² Mt 8, 17; Jn 12, 38; Acts 8, 32; Rom 4, 25; 1 Pet 2, 22–24 etc.

³ Acts 2, 23; 3, 18.

Then it became evident that sinful man, doomed to die because of his voluntary separation from the living God, could be saved only by the transformation of death achieved by Christ's dying and rising. As he pursued wholeheartedly and lovingly the will of his Father, he set himself at odds with the selfishness and pride of sinful humanity. This opposition was pressed to the extreme and he succumbed in death. But the event of death was suffused by his devoted love and from being the moment sealing man's separation from God it became in him the opening into glory and eternal life. The chasm of sin and death separating man from God was bridged for all men in the atoning death and the resurrection of Christ, the suffering servant of Yahweh.

Son of Man

Finally, in another period of persecution, when Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in the first part of the second century B.C., was endeavouring to extinguish the national and religious life of the jews, the prophecy of Daniel contemplates in the climactic seventh chapter a vision of oppression followed by a vision of triumph. In the first vision four beasts emerge from the sea one after another. The sea, as often in hebrew literature, symbolizes evil and disorder. The beasts represent successive tyrannies that oppressed Israel. The vision of triumph begins with God's heavenly court. He is seated on a throne and surrounded by myriads of angels. Then one like a Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven. The contrast is unmistakable: human form instead of bestial; a heavenly origin instead of one from the sea. He is presented before God and receives universal dominion over all peoples and nations and tongues forever.

This prophecy, along with a number of messianic psalms,¹ was an intimation of the divine origin of the messiah to come. They did not affirm this clearly, but they did prepare for the revelation of Christ's divinity. The title which Jesus used most often of himself in the gospel was Son of Man. In itself the term is ambiguous and could mean simply, 'a man', or 'I'. But there was the constant suggestion of a reference to the seventh chapter of Daniel; and at the end of his public life, when he was confronted by the high priest before the official council of judaism, it was his clear claim to be the Son of Man prophesied by Daniel that drew from them the charge of

¹ Cf Ps 2 and 109.

blasphemy and the sentence of death.¹ Son of Man was not much used by christians thereafter to refer to Christ, but the preservation of the title in the gospels shows one of the strands of divine pedagogy that led believers to recognize that God had sent his own Son into the world.

The fulness of time

Throughout the nearly two thousand years of history since the call of Abraham the saving purpose of God remained firm. More and more he involved himself with men by promise and covenant and prophetic utterance to prepare them for the moment when the divine would cross the threshold of eternity to become the heart and centre of human history. St Paul twice refers to the moment of Christ's coming as 'the fulness of time'.² The era of preparation and expectation was over; fulfilment was at hand. The Fathers of the Church commonly described the fulness of time from two points of view.³ Man's sense of need had reached its fulness through the experience of his unutterable and inescapable weakness and loneliness apart from God. In this sense, time was full because the complete measure of human wretchedness in sin was achieved. But time was full in another sense also. The illumination of men's minds was sufficient to ensure that the revelation of God's personal coming as man could be grasped at least remotely within a context of divine concern for salvation. The attraction of the beauty of God was sufficiently strong in enough hearts to ensure that he would not be rejected by all.

At this juncture God spoke his Amen! his final, definitive, irrevocable reply to all man's half-hearted, weak, self-centred responses to his gracious initiative. Man's refusal was here met by a reaffirmation of love so unfathomably deep that if only man would believe and accept it, it would transform his life. From this point on, God's answer stands, and in the case of each man, the ultimate meaning of that answer for him will depend on the attitude he assumes toward it. For 'this child is set for the fall and for the rising of many in Israel'.⁴

To appreciate the unique character of this divine intervention, it must be recalled that up to this point God's guidance of human affairs was in some way extrinsic, from without. However inti-

¹ Cf Mk 14, 62.

³ Cf de Lubac, H., *Catholicism* (London, 1962), d 136.

² Gal 4, 4; Eph 1, 10.

⁴ Lk 2, 34.

mately God might dwell in his creation, it remained always true that he was not part of it. The impulse of his mercy reached into the created world from another sphere of being altogether, the realm of inaccessible light that no man has seen, nor can see.¹ But now God has become part of his creation. When the eternal Son assumed 'the likeness of our sinful flesh',² he entered into and made his own the history of mankind. He became a member of our fallen race, taking to himself the mortal weakness our sins had brought upon us, while remaining always the sinless Son of God in whom his Father is well pleased.

This meant placing within history a power and force of direction that no human failure or resistance could eradicate. Prior to the incarnation, the unity and activity of mankind in pursuit of its destiny was like that of a machine, maintained and repaired from without; but with the coming of Christ and his redemptive work it is like that of a living being whose inner principle of vitality spreads life to all its members and operates from within to repair injury and restore movement.

The incarnation forged an unbreakable bond between God and human nature. For now there is a man who is God, the Son of God born of the Father before all ages. The course of his life led with undeviating fidelity and obedience back to God. 'I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father'.³ It was this utter singleness of purpose that set him at cross purposes with sinful mankind and so led him to die because of our sins. St Luke especially represents his life as led under the holy Spirit inspiring him⁴ until 'He offered himself without blemish through the eternal Spirit to God'.⁵ Passing through death as the total sacrifice of himself to God, he is raised from the dead by the Father accepting his sacrifice. He does not regain the perishable life he had assumed in order to become one of us; rather he comes into the possession of the immortal glory of eternal life, vivified even in his flesh by the holy Spirit. He has reached the goal intended by God for mankind in creation. In Jesus glorified, God's purpose is achieved on behalf of all of us. It remains only to be shared with each of us individually that we may be drawn along the path he took.

Christ the Lord makes the course of his life, death and resurrection the essential movement of history through the continuous

¹ Cf 1 Tim 6, 16.

² Rom 8, 3.

³ Jn 16, 28.

⁴ Cf Lk 4.

⁵ Heb 9, 14.

outpouring of the holy Spirit. Arrived himself at the destiny of mankind, he communicates his Spirit to lead us to where he is. 'Whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God' observes St Paul.¹ Through the gift of the Spirit we are heirs with Christ of eternal glory, 'provided we suffer with him that we may also be glorified with him'.² The presence of the holy Spirit in us, leading and guiding us as Christ was led and guided during his mortal life, is eternal life already begun in us.

God's lordship over history is nowhere more radically affirmed than in the full mystery of Christ, which begins with the incarnation and extends to the parousia and beyond. For here the thrust of the divine purpose is unalterably placed within the movement of mankind towards its goal. No one can escape its beneficent influence. We may respond more or less wholeheartedly to this influence, but in the end it will infallibly build the heavenly city, the glorified body of Christ.

In the life, death and resurrection of Christ, God has passed his irrevocable judgment upon human history and it is a judgment of mercy. Men may falter and sin along the way, but so long as they are willing to turn in faith and repentance to Christ dwelling in creation, they may yet be citizens of God's heavenly city. Only they are excluded who to the end of their lives refuse to accept the gift of the Spirit.

Christ, the meaning of history

Just as all history before Christ was a preparation and expectation of his coming, so all history thereafter is rooted in him and moves to the fulness of Christ at his second coming. For all history now is precisely this: 'the upbuilding of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'.³ As the achievements of man succeed one another, and the latent capacities of human nature are unfolded, all this is rescued from the oblivion of a lifeless, stellar void by the power of Christ who is placed as head over all things and integrates them into himself. And in the end, he communicates eternal life to all who believe in him, at his coming, when he hands over the kingdom to the Father that God may be all in all.⁴

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!⁵

¹ Rom 8, 14.

² Rom 8, 17.

³ Eph 4, 12-13.

⁴ Cf 1 Cor 15, 23-28.

⁵ Apoc 22, 20.