

# PAUL AND PROVIDENCE

By HENRY WANSBROUGH

*'Everything in the heavens and everything on earth. . .'*

WHAT WAS God's plan for men? To consider this question from Paul's point of view is to enter into a different world, the bazaar of the eastern Mediterranean. One might combine two pictures, the first given by Paul himself in his account of claims as an apostle: 'in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans, in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from so-called brothers' (2 Cor 11, 26). It was a world where communications were difficult, wearisome and dangerous, where each country and each port had its own character without the ubiquitous veneer of Hilton and Avis, where the Jewish communities in each city were marked off as strange and prickly, tolerated but hardly assimilated. The other picture is that of a compartment in the London Underground in mid-morning: the bazaar was just as varied and colourful, so that the traveller rubbed shoulders in the market-place with a cosmopolitan crowd, varied in colour, dress, custom and religious belief. It was in this fragmented, heterogeneous and disparate world that Paul attempted to see a pattern of God's design, all things united in God's purpose.

In all Paul's thought and theology one must distinguish three phases, the early letters to the Thessalonians, the central block of the great epistles, and the final so-called 'captivity epistles'. Between these three phases, spanning some dozen years, and starting perhaps a dozen years after Paul's own conversion to Christ, there is the sort of development one would expect from a lively, searching and original mind. Starting with a narrower view, his eye more on detail than on the whole, Paul gradually comes to an all-embracing vision of God's plan for the whole into which everything else fits, and which makes sense of all the details. Paul's increase in depth and penetration and in the appreciation of the ramifications of his gospel is in itself a fascinating study.

At first Paul views the future plan of God principally in the Jewish terms of the coming of the Lord at the end of time. In the

christian view this will of course be the coming of Christ. There is, as yet, no hint of any change of quality planned for the world, but the future event is thought of in mythical and somewhat external terms: the Lord would come down from heaven and the followers of Christ would join in his triumphal train 'to meet the Lord in the air' (1 Thess 4, 17). This conception is in line with the mythical elements drawn from jewish apocalyptic which are adopted into the synoptic apocalypse in the gospels, such features as stars falling from heaven, the trumpet of God, and Jesus coming on the clouds. For us, with our enormously increased scientific knowledge, it is an obviously unsatisfactory and pictorial system. But it is worth pointing out that it is to this extent satisfactory, that there are nevertheless still numbers of the faithful who will accept this expression of the eschatological hope implicitly; it is a powerful and forceful imagery. To transcend it was a major break-through in christian thinking.

Traces of this picture still survive in the great epistles, as testimony to the power of this imagery. There is strong influence also of the imagery produced by the use of Psalm 110, the image of conquered enemies as a footstool under an enthroned monarch. Thus the consummation of the world is viewed in 1 Corinthians 15 as Christ handing over to God the kingdom and his conquered enemies – a scene reminiscent of the great carved stone reliefs of the Near East, on which bound captives are presented to an awesome enthroned king with his crown prince in attendance behind the throne: a scene also which is complementary to the scene in Daniel 7, when a son of man is given full authority to use on earth; now he hands it back to the Father: 'after that will come the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, having done away with every sovereignty, authority and power' (1 Cor 15, 24). Again the same sort of imagery is to be seen still later in the figure of a triumphal procession, modelled on the victory processions after a battle, when the victorious general and his troops paraded their captives and spoils through the city streets to the temple of their patron god: we are partners with Christ in his triumphal procession (2 Cor 2, 14; Col 2, 15).

## II

Such pictorial images of God's plan for the future history of the world soon fade into the background of Paul's thought, remaining for a time only as unexorcized survivals. By the time he comes to

write the great epistles, he has begun to speak of the 'mystery' which was God's plan, 'predestined to be for our glory before the ages began' (1 Cor 2, 7). The term and the idea are related to the whole concept of Jewish apocalyptic. The central theme of this was that at the end of time a secret revelation was to be made to a privileged few. The various books of Jewish apocalyptic purport to be this revelation, made in God's good time, showing in cryptic terms his plan for the world. Paul takes up the theme that the mystery, at length revealed at the end of time, is the wisdom of God: the hidden wisdom which is considered by the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, and by the pagans madness. This mystery is, of course, centred on the cross. It is not, however, confined simply to the crucifixion, but embraces the whole of God's plan for men in Christ.

In brief, the mystery, or Paul's gospel, is that history reaches its fulfilment in Christ. The fulfilment of Jewish history – and to the Jew no other peoples had a destiny, so that Paul would view it as the fulfilment of history as such – was to be a saving intervention of God. This has taken place in Christ's resurrection, and therefore to ask what God's plan and providence are is to ask how the resurrection affects man. In the great epistles the answer is given chiefly by the idea of incorporation into Christ. Man reaches his destiny by being taken up into Christ's resurrection.

Paul envisages this in two ways. Firstly he sees Christ as the second Adam. As Adam the first man was the progenitor of humanity and the founder of the human race (that Paul understood this historically is profoundly unimportant, for Adam is only the type of Christ), so Christ is the founder of a second and renewed humanity. But in contrast to the first Adam whose disobedience caused the rift between God and man, the second Adam by his obedience heals this rift and brings humanity to its destined relationship with God (Rom 5, 15–19). Hellenistic Judaism had expressed the idea of a human destiny to perfection by means of a myth of two Adams, the first a heavenly Adam, a faultless archetype of man, and a second Adam, the fallen progenitor of the human race. Paul reverses this, protesting that the heavenly Adam, the faultless archetype of a humanity according to God's plan, is in fact not the first but the second Adam, who is Christ. The fallen Adam is the first Adam. Thus instead of the pessimistic picture of humanity today built in the image of a fallen ancestor, divorced from the intended archetype which was never realized on earth, Paul gives us the optimistic

picture of a humanity which is to be re-formed after the model of an already realized archetype, a life-giving spirit. It is the concept of hellenistic Judaism which he is opposing in 1 Corinthians 15:

The first man, Adam, as scripture says, became a living soul; but the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit. That is, first the one with the soul, not the spirit, and after that, the one with the spirit. The first man, being from the earth, is earthly by nature; the second man is from heaven . . . . And we, who have been modelled on the earthly man, will be modelled on the heavenly man (1 Cor 15, 45-47, 49).

And this destiny, to be incorporated in the second Adam, is just as universal as the incorporation into the first Adam. In other words, simply by the fact of being human we are called to be absorbed into Christ.

The second way in which Paul expresses his approach to man's destiny by means of incorporation into Christ is by employing the thorough-going idea that the Christian has, by baptism, put on Christ. This metaphor, from dressing or conceivably from drama (putting on a mask and so entering into a personality), used so frequently in the middle group of letters (Gal 3, 27; Rom 13, 14; 1 Cor 15, 53) is not merely external vesting. Being baptized into Christ, the Christian has been baptized into his death, and has risen to Christ's new life, making Christ's history his own, so that everything Christ has undergone is now part of the personal history of the Christian, and similarly for the future, the destiny of the Christian is Christ's too. This sharing of life and destiny is emphasized again and again by Paul both by what he says and by how he says it. In Romans he stresses that we can call God 'Abba' in the same way as Christ can, and that we share his inheritance (Rom 8, 14-17). In First Corinthians the same message comes out in many ways: our bodies are Christ's in such a way that Christ would be defiled by a Christian bedding with a prostitute (1 Cor 6, 15); sharing in Christ's eucharistic body is significant because we all form the one body of Christ (11, 16); various complementary gifts in the christian community demonstrate the unity and complexity of Christ's body (12, 12-30). Merely in the words Paul uses, the intermingling of being and destiny of the Christian with Christ's is most forcibly brought home by Paul's need to invent a whole set of curious new hybrid expressions: these he forms by means of the greek prefix *syn* (as in synchronize, syndrome, symphony), meaning 'with' or 'together with'. By these he expresses the sharing in a

quality or event of Christ. Since in English we more normally express such concomitance with the latin-based prefix *con*, one might coin a concatenation of words which are hardly more barbarous than Paul's greek inventions: 'conform' (we share his form), 'concrucified, comburied, conraised, conglorified, conlivened, co-heirs'. By these words Paul expresses not merely that we go through the same sort of process as Christ, but that we in Christ took part in his own crucifixion, burial, resurrection, glorification, inheritance. Christ's destiny then is that of the Christian, his follower. There is only a strange and temporary dislocation, in that Christ is already transformed and glorified, whereas the Christian is not yet transformed into glory. In so far as this is the case, the Christian is in an unnatural state, not yet sharing with Christ, though it is natural to him that he should, since he already lives by Christ's life.

### III

In the central block of the great epistles, Paul thinks primarily of the destiny of the individual Christian. It is in the captivity epistles, Colossians and Ephesians, that the canvas becomes broader. The author is here in conflict with cosmological ideas about the 'elements' and 'rulers of this world', intermediaries and angels, possibly connected with ideas which will later develop into gnostic theories. The broader view of his opponents forces the author himself to see Christ's position as it is in the cosmos, and this brings Christology to a new peak. Christ is viewed not simply as the Son in whom all men are brought into relationship with God, nor any longer merely on the plane of relationship to individuals. He is the head and principle of creation as a whole.

Correspondingly, the plan of God is now seen in all its breadth as embracing the whole of creation. In the hymn to Christ at the beginning of Colossians it is not merely man who is brought back to relationship with God, but all things: 'God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross' (I, 19-20). The expression here translated in the Jerusalem Bible, 'all perfection', is a key-word of these letters, but no easier to tie down for that. Literally it means 'the fulness', and the context here suggests that what is meant is the fulness of the universe, the complement or totality of all things, as in the next line. So what the author means is that all creation is

brought to its term and fulfilment by Christ's resurrection, somehow in him. How this is so is not clear, except that there is a parallel drawn between Christ as principle of creation, the image of the unseen God, playing the part in creation which traditionally in the Old Testament is played by Wisdom, and Christ as principle of the resurrection, the first-fruits from the dead. In his reconciliation of mankind to God, of which the glorification at the resurrection is the guarantee, all the universe is involved.

This is spelled out, as the plan of God, or 'the mystery of his purpose', in the hymn of Ephesians about the choice and predestination of Christians. This hymn has been aptly (but not wholly compellingly) divided into seven elements or movements: God's choice – adoption as sons – forgiveness of sins – revelation of the mystery – choice of the Jews as his own people – sealing of the gentiles too with his Spirit – the praise of God's glory. In this sevenfold scheme the high-point is in one way the last element; but in another way the key is the fourth or central element, the revelation of the mystery made in Christ, 'when the times had run their course to the end'. This 'mystery of his will' was that all things should be 'brought together under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth' (Eph 1, 10). The verb which expresses this idea is again coined by Paul, and expresses a number of inter-related nuances. Christ is head of the body (the old idea, present already in the great epistles), but also the principle of organization, the ruling principle which brings order out of chaos and makes the whole fit together coherently and harmoniously. So Christ, becoming head of a creation which was previously headless, supplies leadership, direction and coherence to the universe.

There seems to be two different ways in which created things may, in this completion of God's plan, come under Christ's headship. The first and more obvious is the way in which the Church comes under him, forming the body which is ruled, guided, nourished and cared for by the head. The major part of the letter is devoted to showing how Jew and gentile are now united in him (the fifth and sixth elements in the sevenfold hymn of God's plan); the wall between them has been broken down and the gentiles have been called to share the inheritance of the Jews. The second way in which Christ is head uses the idea of the *plerōma*. This difficult and disputed term is literally translated 'the fulness'. It is certainly related to the Church, and in Ephesians 1, 23 seems almost to be identified with it. It seems that the author is, after the manner of Paul, using a

term drawn from the current popular stoic philosophy, according to which the cosmos is called 'the fulness', since it is filled with the spirit of God, and complements the spirit of God. This would agree with Col 1, 19, where two phrases are parallel: 'God wanted all fulness to dwell in him and everything to be reconciled into him'; and it would fit Ephesians 1, 23, which speaks of 'the fulness of him who is wholly filled in all ways'. One cannot claim that the idea is clear; but it does seem that the author is struggling to find a means to express the way in which Christ is head and principle of the universe in a way which is different from his headship of the Church which is his body: the universe is, in God's plan, the fulness of Christ, completing him and completed by him, so that he brings it to its completion by performing the functions of head and principle, while the cosmos brings Christ to completion as the recipient of his perfection and reconciliation with God. The term 'body of Christ' is reserved to the Church which lives by him and shares his life in a special way; but in a broader sense the whole universe too is articulated in him and receives from him its *rationale*.

#### IV

It has long been a commonplace to say that the difference between the greek and the hebrew conceptions of history is that, for the hebrew, history has a definite term and end-point, a goal to which it is thrusting. This *eschaton* controls and gives meaning to all that precedes. For Paul, this end-point which is the consummation of God's plan is at first in the future, and is viewed in an imaged or imaginative way, which is hardly developed from that of the jewish apocalyptic. It is merely the application of the ideas of jewish apocalyptic; only now it is Christ who will come as the Lord to declare and operate the consummation of all things, which is thought of in terms of a triumphal procession culminating in the presentation of the kingdom to the Father. What happens to the rest of creation is not at all clear, but the 'cash-value' of the apocalyptic imagery consists chiefly in two points: God's plan is approaching its fulfilment in Christ, and the final consummation will consist in total union with the Lord.

Later on Paul deepens and broadens this conception in two ways. Firstly, he places less emphasis on the future, but more and more sees God's plan to be already accomplished. Union with Christ, integration into him, has already occurred. In the great epistles, the

limitation on this is expressed in this way, that we are, up to now, integrated only into his death and not yet (though this is sure and is only a matter of time) into his resurrection; but by the time the captivity epistles come to be written, the limitation is expressed only in terms of 'manifesting' what is already present: when Christ is revealed, 'you too will be revealed in all your glory' (Col 3, 4). Of course, the author still speaks of the body of Christ continuing to be built up (Eph 2, 22), but there has been a significant shift in the delicate balance between 'already' and 'not yet': a distinct advance in the realization of the 'already'. Secondly, the conception of God's plan in Christ now reaches out to embrace not only men but the whole of creation, for in the risen Christ the whole cosmos finds its principle of coherence and completion.

So far we have dealt exclusively in biblical categories, analysing the data of Paul on his own terms. It is time finally to ask what is meant by these ideas, for Paul moved in a very different thought-world, and his images and presuppositions need to be translated into terms which have sense also in our thought-world. Particularly problematical is the notion that God's plan extends to the whole of the cosmos. It is easy enough to see that men are destined to be saved by their attachment to Christ, but two questions remain to be asked urgently. In what sense can the non-human creation participate in this redemption? How can men who have never even heard of Christ and the hebraeo-christian tradition be said to be saved by Christ?

An answer to the first question might be outlined in function of the truth that man is the crown of creation. In the last analysis it is man's use of material things, his reverence towards or his exploitation of the cosmos for his own selfishness that makes things either good or bad, ordered or disordered. The ultimate evil is not suffering and pain, for suffering and pain can be means of ennoblement, even sometimes the way of an obvious transformation into the image of God. The evil lies in man's inability to cope with and grow through the in-built pains and deficiencies of life in this world. The salvation of the world must be envisaged on lines complementary to the sin of the world: as the sin of the world includes the idea of sin spreading to all men, infecting with its miasmatic contagion their attitudes and personal relationships with each other and with the world around them, so the redemption of the world, its transformation into the fulness of Christ and its subsumption under him as its head and principle, must involve the recession of this disorder.

In proportion as man becomes transformed into Christ and informed by his life-principle, so he becomes more able to cope with the pains and limitations inherent in his state; and so nature, even in all its roughness, begins to smile on him. The whole cosmos becomes to him a matter for joy and praise.

The final question is more difficult even to begin to answer. Have we to say that all men, of every religion and none, who are saved, are saved through Christ? This is at least part of what is asserted in the doctrine that all things find their completion in Christ. That the good Buddhist and good Hindu are saved through Christ and so are drawn into Christ is a difficult teaching. The doctrine 'no salvation outside the Church' was originally evolved in a milieu where the case of a man unaware of Christ's message was an extraordinary oddity, where theologians seemed to be ignorant of the immense masses who would never be within practicable reach of the gospel. The special solutions to an extraordinary situation suggested by some medieval theologians (a special revelation), or the message of an angel to bring the gospel to such an isolated *puer in silvis* are simply no longer credible. Christian theologians have more recently come to teach, however, that even those who do not know Christ are saved in and by Christ. It is not necessary to deny that there is good in the other great world religions, but the dual assertion is made that in so far as these religions lead them to good they lead them to Christ, and that the redemption they receive was won for them by Christ, even though they do not know it.

There are immense difficulties here, especially in regard to the great eastern religions. In what sense can it be true that a Buddhist achieves his enlightenment through Christ? At least a great deal of thought must go to the solution of this question, and it is perhaps too short a time since the western Church and its theologians began to take seriously the other great world religions to have reached a satisfactory conclusion. Meanwhile must we say that Paul, limited as he was in his world-view to the world of the mediterranean civilisation, was referring only to the hebraeo-christian world, when he spoke of the summing up of all things in Christ? It is indeed difficult to see how the statements of Colossians and Ephesians, about 'everything in heaven and everything on earth' and Christ 'who fills the whole creation', can be understood in such a restricted sense; but it remains true that the relationship of Christ to those who find salvation, liberation or enlightenment through the great religions of the East still demands the consideration of theologians.