

DIVINE CALL AND HUMAN RESPONSE

The Syriac Tradition II: St Isaac of Nineveh

IT IS A matter for wonder that, at a time when Greek East and Latin West were both plunged into the despond of the Dark Ages during the seventh and eighth centuries, the monks of the syriac-speaking Churches — by then living under muslim rule — were engaged in two very different activities both of which still indirectly leave their mark today: in Syria, Orthodox monks were translating and commenting on Aristotle's *Organon*, a prelude to the translations into Arabic, whose subsequent Latin renderings were to have such an influence upon scholastic theology; while further east, in modern Iraq and western Iran, monks of the Church of the East were producing a literature of astonishing richness and insight on the spiritual life. Best known of these oriental solitaries is St Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century),¹ who, like many other mystics, has proved to be a truly ecumenical figure, transcending the boundaries of ecclesiastical divisions. His works, translated into Greek by two monks of the palestinian monastery of St Saba in the ninth century, and first published in 1770, are still favourite reading on Mount Athos today. They also provided the main stimulus for the contemporary monastic revival in the Coptic Orthodox Church, centring around the figure of Father Matta the Poor.

St Isaac was in fact by no means an isolated figure; but his writings on the spiritual life have enjoyed such a wide influence that he has become the obvious representative of the later syriac spiritual tradition.

Although he wrote primarily with his fellow monks and solitaries in mind, almost all of what he has to say is applicable to all Christians in whatever walk of life. For Isaac, withdrawal from and renunciation of the 'world' meant, not the physical removal of oneself to a monastery or the desert, but separation from 'bodily behaviour and carnal thoughts' (p 13): the 'world' is an interior state, and not something exterior. Renunciation of this inner world of self is essential for anyone who wants to draw near to God (p 1); it involves a radical re-orientation of one's life and attitudes. He offers a simple text by which one can discover how far one is living in the world. If, upon self-examination, you find yourself moved by 'love of riches, the accumulation of belongings, self-indulgence (which gives rise to sexual desire), love of honour (which is the source of envy), the exercise of authority, self-esteem and pride of office, self-enhancement, a high reputation among men (which gives rise to resentment), or fear for one's body' (p 13), then you are indeed still in the world — even though you may physically be living in a secluded cell. The 'world' turns out to be nothing other than the 'self' which Christ called upon his disciples to deny (p 294).

Abandonment of the 'world' is only one side of the coin: it must be accompanied by self-abandonment to divine care. This divine care

surrounds all men at all times, although it is not seen by any but those who have purified themselves from sins and who think of God perpetually: to such people it is revealed clearly (pp 84-85).

Such abandonment to God's care has practical consequences, as for example when an unexpected visitor turns up:

When someone comes and asks you for something you happen to have, do not say in your heart 'I will keep it for myself to enjoy, rather than let it go just now; God will provide for him at another's hand: I will put it away for my own use' (p 47).

These, he goes on, are the thoughts of impious people: the righteous should always gladly give, and if they are left in difficulties themselves as a result, then God will take care of their needs. In another passage he stresses that

God's providing for his associates is truly amazing: even in the desert without human hands he provides for those who inhabit it and who hope on him (p 301).

Self-abandonment upon God at the same time involves a perpetual consciousness of his presence:

Sit before his face at all times, thinking of him and recollecting him in your heart. Otherwise, if you only come to see him after a long interval, you will not be able to speak freely with him because of your sense of shame. Freedom of speech is born from constancy; such constancy among men concerns only the things of the body, but with God it is the attitude of the soul, and the nearness brought about by prayer (p 50).

Prayer of course is at the very centre of christian life. The aim of prayer is quite simply 'to acquire love of God, for in prayer all the reasons for loving God are to be discovered' (p 294). Elsewhere St Isaac expresses the same idea in the form of an actual prayer:

Make me worthy to know you, my Lord, so that I may love you too. I do not desire the knowledge that involves distraction of the mind, that comes from the application of learning; rather, make me worthy of that knowledge whereby the mind comes to praise you as it gazes upon you with that gaze which banishes from the mind the sensations of the world. Make me worthy to be raised above the

imaginings which my own will gives birth to, so that I am impelled to gaze upon the bonds of the cross with a continuous gaze such as nature does not give, thus crucifying my mind whose freedom has been rendered useless by its subjecting itself to impulse. Place in me the pure metal of your love, so that I may be removed from the world as I follow you; stir in me the awareness of that humility of yours wherein you lived in the world having put on the raiment of our body, so that, as I continuously recall it, I may accept with delight the humiliation of my own nature (pp 150-51).

Syriac spirituality had always laid great stress on the 'taking up of the cross' as an essential part of the christian life, which was to be lived to the full as an *imitatio Christi*; such a life inevitably involves 'afflictions' and 'suffering'. As Isaac put the matter elsewhere, 'the love of God cannot be kindled in a heart which loves comfort' (p 37).

The crucifixion of the self is by no means confined to ascetic practices; it also involves 'compelling ourselves perpetually to be inwardly full of mercy towards all kinds of rational beings at all times' (p 379). 'Compel yourself to show honour to your fellow men', he writes in another passage, where he bids his reader:

Love sinners, but reject their works. Do not despise them for their shortcomings, lest you be tempted by the same. Remember that you share in the stink of Adam and that you too are clad with his malady. To the person who needs passionate prayer and gentle words do not instead give blame, otherwise you may be the cause of his destruction and his soul will be required at your hand. Follow the example of doctors, who apply something cold in the case of fevers.

When you meet your neighbour, force yourself to pay him more honour than may be his due: kiss his hand and his foot; make your heart fervent with a holy love for him; grasp his hands time and time again, placing them on your eyes and caressing them with great honour. Attribute to his person all sorts of virtues, even if they may not apply to him. And when he is absent, speak good and noble things of him. Address him in respectful terms. In this sort of way, not only will you impel him to desire these virtues (since he will be ashamed of the undeserved reputation with which you credit him) and sow in him the seed of good deeds, but you will also find that, by habituating yourself in this way, you will establish in yourself gentle and humble manners, and you will be freed from many tiresome struggles, against the likes of which others have to guard themselves by constant labours.

... This should be your attitude towards all men. But when you get angry with someone, and you reprimand him or rebuke him out of

zeal for the faith, or provoked by his evil actions, it is precisely at that point that you should beware of your own self: we all have the just Judge in heaven. If, on the other hand, out of compassion, you seek to turn him to the truth, then you will actually suffer on his behalf. You will speak just a word or two to him in tears and love; you will not flare up at him, but you will banish from your countenance any sign of hostility. Love does not know how to get angry or indignant, it does not reprimand in a hurtful way. The sign of the presence of real love and knowledge is a profound humility issuing from the inner mind (pp 54-55).

In this connection we find the idea of 'compelling oneself' applied to prayer as well: 'make yourself labour in supplication at all times before God' (p 9). And intercessory prayer, to bear fruit, must be accompanied by participatory suffering:

Share with those who are suffering in heart with your own suffering and groaning in heart-felt prayer; then there will be opened up before your request a fountain of grace (p 9).

To achieve this state of true compassion, of 'suffering with', a self-emptying in imitation of Christ's own self-emptying (Phil 2, 7) is required, and this can only be born of an attitude of 'profound humility'. 'Humility', Isaac points out, 'is the very garment of the Divinity, for the Word who became man clothed himself in it' (p 384). Whoever would imitate Christ, then, must likewise 'wrap himself' in humility (1 Pet 5, 5).

A hint of what this humility implies is given in a famous passage which describes the threefold end towards which the Christian should strive: repentance, purity and perfection:

What is repentance? 'The desisting from former sins and suffering on account of them'. What sums up purity? 'A heart that feels compassion for every created being'. And what is perfection? 'Profound humility, which consists in the abandonment of everything visible and invisible'. Now the visible comprises everything to do with the senses, and the invisible means all thoughts on such subjects. On another occasion the same Old Man was asked, What is humility? 'The embracing of a voluntary mortification with respect to everything'. And what is a compassionate heart? 'The heart that is enflamed in this way embraces the entire creation — man, birds, animals, and even demons'. At the recollection of them, and at the sight of them, such a man's eyes fill with tears that arise from the great compassion which presses on his heart. The heart grows tender and cannot endure to hear of or look upon any injury or even the smallest suffering inflicted upon anything in creation.

For this reason such a man prays increasingly with tears even for irrational animals and for the enemies of truth and for all who harm it, that they may be guarded and be forgiven. The compassion, which pours out from his heart without measure, like God's, extends even to reptiles (p 341).

Such humility, although it is something that has to be striven for, ultimately comes only as a gift from God:

Humility is a power full of mystery which the perfect saints receive once they have fulfilled the goal of their way of life. This power is only given to those who have perfected the full course of virtue by the power of the Grace within themselves — in so far as human nature can achieve this, given its limitations. Humility is a virtue which embraces everything (p 387).

This humility is also something that animals can sense:

If a person of humility comes near dangerous wild animals, then the moment these catch sight of him, their ferocity is calmed: they come up to him and attach themselves to him as though he were their master, wagging their tails and licking his hands and feet. This is because they smell that fragrance which emanated from Adam when he named the animals in Paradise before the Fall: this fragrance was taken away from us at the Fall, but Christ gave it back to us at his coming (p 386).

'Blessed indeed is the person who has acquired this humility', exclaims Isaac, 'for at all times he leans on Jesus's bosom' (p 388; cf Jn 13, 23; 21, 20). But how can it be acquired in the first place? 'Look at Christ who commanded this and who at the same time also grants this gift, and see how he acquired it: you must imitate him', is Isaac's reply (pp 388-89). But this imitation of Christ will inevitably involve one in suffering. Referring to Matthew 16, 24, 'If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me', Isaac explains: 'every virtue is called the "cross", in that it fulfils the spiritual commandment; for all who want to live a religious life in Jesus Christ will find themselves afflicted' (p 357).

The 'cross', then, can take on many differing aspects. But it also brings its incomparable rewards, for it 'is the gate to the mysteries, whereby the mind gains entrance to an apperception of the heavenly mysteries. For knowledge of the cross is hidden within the sufferings which the cross involves: a sharing in these sufferings brings with it an awareness of what the cross is, as the Apostle Paul says (Phil 4, 10); the greater place the suffering of Christ takes within us, the greater becomes our consolation in Christ' (p 365).

As St Isaac points out, in a passage immediately following his prayer quoted above:

The ascent to the cross consists of two parts: the crucifixion of the body, and the ascent to contemplation. The former is achieved by one's own free will, the latter by divine action (p 151).

Divine action requires human co-operation: 'God is compassionate and prone to give; but he desires that we give him the opportunity' (p 122). A model for this co-operation between God and man is provided for in the Eucharist at the invocation of the Holy Spirit:

It is appropriate that it should be when the gaze of the human spirit is exclusively fixed upon God and when a single thought dominates the soul in prayer, that divine mercy should well forth from God. For we see that, when we offer the visible Sacrifice, it is when the mind is concentrated upon God in supplication and beseeching that the gift of the Spirit descends upon the bread and wine which we lay upon the altar (pp 116-17).

In another passage, Isaac compares the activity of the Holy Spirit in prayer with the 'overshadowing' of the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation.² Although Mary is placed in a special category, in that her whole body and soul were sanctified, this 'overshadowing' can have a temporary effect upon any others whom the Spirit deems worthy:

The mind is snatched away in wonder as it is expanded to receive some divine revelation. As long as the divine activity overshadows his mind, such a person is exalted above the movement of the thoughts of his soul through communion with the Holy Spirit (p 262).

Isaac has quite a number of passages where he describes the effect of these altered states of consciousness brought about by divine grace.³ As the following passage makes clear, he had evidently experienced them himself on numerous occasions:

Then, on account of the inner ardour which is set in motion by wonder at the understanding of God's bounties, he will of a sudden raise up his voice and praise without being wearied, while the inner ardour gives place to thanksgiving of the tongue as well; and so he will give utterance to his feelings long and wonderfully. He who has experienced these things clearly . . . will understand when I say that it occurs without variation, for it has been experienced many times (p 72).

Paradoxically these illumined states in fact constitute a return to the 'natural' state of the soul, as it was originally created (p. 15). Grace is able to bring out the soul's innate natural beauty just as Spring brings out the beauty of the earth:

The power of spring makes even the smallest plants in the valleys to bud, warming the earth as fire does a cauldron, as that it sends forth the treasures of the plants which God has laid in the earth's nature, to the joy of creation and to his glory. Likewise Grace makes manifest all the glory which God has hidden in the nature of the soul, showing the soul this glory and making it glad because of its own beauty (p 349).

Isaac is here reflecting, in somewhat different terms, an emphasis that is predominant in the earlier syriac spiritual tradition of St Ephrem and others: the goal of the sanctified life is the recovery of the paradisiacal state, when Adam and Eve were still clothed in the 'Robe of Praise'. Paradise regained was, however, far more glorious than the Paradise of the creation narrative. In the latter, Adam, through disobedience, never received the divinization that obedience would have brought him; this potential for *theosis* was now restored for man through the advent of the Second Adam. As St Ephrem had expressed the matter in poetic form:

Divinity flew down and descended
to raise and draw up humanity.
The Son has made beautiful the servant's deformity,
and he has become a god, just as he had desired.⁴

Sebastian Brock.

¹ There is an english translation of his works (from the Syriac — *Mar Isaacus Ninivita de Perfectione religiosa*, ed P. Bedjan, Paris, 1909), by A. J. Wensinck, *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh* (Amsterdam, 1923; reprint Wiesbaden, 1969). All my references are to this edition, but I have substituted my own translations. For the principal secondary literature, see my 'St Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac Spirituality', in *Sobornost*, vii, 2 (1975), pp 79-89.

² P 23. But Isaac brings together the Eucharistic epiklesis and the Annunciation in a different way from some other syriac writers. See my 'Mary and the Eucharist', in *Sobornost* 1, 2 (incorporating *Eastern Churches Review*, 1979), pp 50-59.

³ See my 'World and Sacrament in the Writings of the Syrian Fathers', in *Sobornost*, vi, 10 (1974), pp 685-96.

⁴ Hymns on Virginity XLVIII, 17-18. Cp my *The Holy Spirit in the Syrian Baptismal Tradition* (Kattayam, India, 1979), p 64.