

THE BLESSED VISION OF PEACE

By JAMES WALSH

IN HIS preaching of the gospel in Asia Minor, St Paul was convinced that those converted to Christ were already introduced into a radically new world and an entirely different life. They had been delivered from darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1,13), seeing now with a vision that was none other than a share in God's inaccessible light, and the life of him who alone has immortality (1 Tim 6,16). They were citizens of heaven; and they could rejoice in an individual transformation which imaged the risen personality of the Incarnate Word (Phil 3,20-21). They could think his thoughts and feel his feelings, share his experiences as Redeemer and Saviour, for he was sharing his Spirit with them (1 Cor 2,14-16; Phil 2,5ff). They were informed by a newness of mind, possessed of new nature, created after the likeness of God (Eph 4, 24-25); to the extent that they were anointed, as was Christ, in the very humanity he shared with them, with the graces of the Spirit (Gal 5,22).

The 'image-theology' so firmly rooted in the apostolic preaching has always been at the centre of the Church's theological reflection as well as of her catechesis. The very first analogy of the triune God to which most of us were introduced as children was St Augustine's 'memory, understanding and will'. For more than sixteen centuries it was the commonest and perhaps the most important religious image in the West. It also popularized the augustinian psychology as no other symbol could have done. And in the high middle ages it was a feature of the emerging english language, of which theological terminology was as formative as that of the new technology in the American-English of the twentieth century. Nonetheless the image which it describes — 'let us make man in our image and after our likeness' (Gen 1, 26) — is very frail: no more robust than any other human language used to picture the Godhead; and nothing seems to be devalued more quickly than the coinage of religious phraseology. When we employ it, then, we must insist afresh on the profundity —

even the mystery — of its meaning. ‘Memory’ is a word whose connotations are now too wide and too shallow. The fourteenth-century author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* preferred ‘mind’ to indicate the self-conscious awareness which Augustine’s *memoria* represents. ‘Mind’, he writes, ‘is called a principal power [of the soul] because it contains in itself spiritually not only all the other powers but also the objects on which the other powers work’.¹ *Jesu, dulcis memoria*, wrote the poet contemporary of St Bernard of Clairvaux; and he was translated by a nineteenth-century Englishman:

Jesus, the very thought of thee
With sweetness fills my breast . . .

Memory in its fullest sense is vital to our reading and our spiritual understanding of Scripture. An excellent illustration is given us by the great historian Eusebius². He tells how St Irenaeus, as a youth, sat at the feet of St Polycarp who, in his turn, had listened to John, the apostle and evangelist. This is what Irenaeus himself wrote about the experience, in his letter to Florius:

I can remember, because what we learn as children grows with the spirit and is made one with it. . . . So I can describe the place where the blessed Polycarp used to sit and speak, how he came in and went out . . . how he spoke about his relationship with John and with others who had seen the Lord . . . how he *remembered* their words and the things that he had heard them say about the Lord — his signs and his sayings — from eye-witnesses of the life of the *Logos*. So at that time, through the Lord’s compassionate love, I noted them down: not in writing, but on the waxen tablet of my heart. And I have incessantly pondered them in loyalty and truth.

The same John reminds us, as well, that Jesus did many other signs which are not recorded in the book of the fourth Gospel: but that what is written is written that we in turn may inscribe it on the tablets of our hearts and continue to ponder it in loyalty and truth. All of this amounts to a description of meditation and contemplation and the part they play in the development of the spiritual intelligence as applied to the word of God.

As with the young Irenaeus, the gospels and the apostolic preaching evoke memories of the signs and the sayings of the Lord: the risen Christ, that is. For the apostolic message concerns the Word of Life (1 Jn 1, 1); and its very utterance brings heavenly joy to the believer. The Jesus we first see, according to John, is the lamb of God, the lamb already slain when the evangelists record his

baptismal appearance (Jn 1,31-34; Lk 3,22), reigning with the Father, and worthy of honour and glory and power (Apoc 4,6.13). The ultimate sense and meaning of the scriptures to the faithful is always eschatological. Equally, they speak to us for 'peace in our faith' (Rom 15,13), that our joy may be complete. Equally, Mary is filled with the grace of Christ because, in the moment of her *fiat*, he is already ruling over the house of the new Israel for ever (Lk 1,29.32); God is already 'the Saviour, mindful of his mercy' (1,47.54).

It would seem impossible, then, to overstate the prime importance of memory for the contemplative process itself as for the development of the spiritual understanding. It is not only that anyone versed in the *lectio divina* can betake himself to the wilderness without any *aide-memoire* in the shape of the books of the scriptures or even of the psalter. William of St Thierry says as much of the Carthusian hermit in his *Golden Letter*,³ and a similar story is told of the holy ploughman and the penitential psalms.⁴ But we find Paul insisting that the didactic purpose of the Scriptures is to show that the object of our hope is eternal: 'May the God of hope bring you such joy and peace in your faith that the power of the Holy Spirit will remove all bounds to hope' (Rom 15,4-13).

Further, as the author of *The Cloud* reminds us, 'mind' contains an affective power which is likewise limitless. After reminding us that God

fits himself exactly to our souls by adapting his Godhead to them; and our souls are fitted exactly to him by the worthiness of our creation after his image and likeness,

he goes on to say:

Now all rational creatures, angels and men alike, have in them, each one individually, one chief working power, which is called a knowing power, and another chief working power called a loving power; and of these two powers, God, who is the maker of them, is always incomprehensible to the first, the knowing power. But to the second, which is the loving power, he is entirely comprehensible in each one individually; so much so that one loving soul of itself, because of love, would be able to comprehend him who is entirely sufficient, and much more so without limit, to fill all the souls of men and angels that could ever exist.

This is the everlastingly wonderful miracle of love, which shall never have an end.⁵

'The invisible nature of God, his power and deity, are clearly perceivable in the things that have been made. But men became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened' (Rom 1,23-24). Under the ordinary workings of Providence, only the sacred page is able to enlighten this ignorance; but its truly miraculous profundity is more than sufficient to energize the expanding dimensions of the human mind.

The biblical fact

St Ambrose writes of the sorry story of David (2 Sam 11-12): 'I know that he was a man and not a prodigy; I know that it is normal that a man should commit sin. He sinned, as is the habit of kings; but he became a penitent — an unaccustomed role for a king'.⁶ The *res gesta*, the factual 'this-worldly' history, is of itself revelatory of the glory of God in the pardon of salvation (cf Ps 50). So Ignatius Loyola introduces his exercitant to the purgative life (Exx 10) by means of the 'history' of the fallen angels, the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and the mortal sin which he presumes that everyman will have committed (Exx 50-52). Ignatius calls this 'a meditation by means of those three powers of the soul' which image the triune God: the application of the memory, the understanding and the will (Exx 45,49). And in his annotations (Exx 2), he insists that the retreat director give 'the history of the meditation or contemplation', faithfully, briefly and precisely. Any pondering, intellectual or affective, will be the exercitant's own: accompanied, it is to be hoped, by an influx of the divine grace which will enlighten the understanding and impart a new relish for the mysteries of faith.

The first vision of creation given us in the *Spiritual Exercises* is of the *vallis lacrymarum*: 'one's spirit, one's own self a captive in this vale of misery; in exile, as it seems, among brute beasts' (Exx 47). This is indeed the more normal course of events. The historical action of the Scriptures may be studded with the spectacular, God's marvellous and repeated interventions on behalf of his peoples; but, as the major prophets never tire of lamenting, the Old Testament 'offers us a very fine criminal repertoire'.⁷ It is true that Ezechiel's blessed vision of Jerusalem, the holy city of peace, is given us again in the last book of the New Testament (Ezek 40 etc; Apoc 21-22); but we are caught up in apocalyptic catastrophe, awaiting yet another coming and another promise, that he will make his home amongst his people: that they will indeed be his people and he their God, and that all mourning shall have an end (Ezek 38,2.22; Apoc 21,3-4).

Allegory, mystery and faith

St Bernard is merely restating a patristic commonplace when he tells us that there will be more than one interpretation of a sacred text, 'fitted to varying needs and circumstances'; nor shall we expect them all to be legitimate or equally valuable. Paul himself, however, is the guarantee for the allegorical or mystical sense (in the wider meaning of 'mystery') when he informs his Galatians:

It is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman . . . this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery . . . she corresponds to the present Jerusalem. . . . But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. . . . For freedom Christ has set us free (Gal 4, 21-5,1).

The simplest description of biblical allegory, as understood by the fathers and medieval commentators of the western Church, is 'the spiritual interpretation of the historical facts'.⁸ It links the theology of the time to its spirit of contemplation, for it is the same kind of understanding that faith seeks whenever it searches the scriptures according to the custom and the behest of the Lord himself, as we may reasonably argue (cf Lk 24,45; Jn 5,39). The object of both faith and understanding is the face-to-face vision, which can be attained only by the discovery of the mysteries of Christ hidden under the letter — the literal sense — of the Old Testament. Yet he remains the mystery, the sacrament, of the New Testament, 'beginning from the humility of faith — that is, that he was born, suffered, died and was buried'.⁹ All of which is not much more than a gloss on the third chapter of Ephesians: 'the insight into the mystery of Christ . . . now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit . . . the unsearchable riches of Christ . . . the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God'. To grow in spiritual understanding is to be strengthened with might through his Spirit, so that he dwells in our hearts through faith, that we may know Christ's love which surpasses knowledge, so that we may be filled with all the fulness of God.

The eschatological texture of this reflective prayer of St Paul is plain. Augustine calls the time of this growth 'the time of faith'. When once we have heard the voice of the Father revealing his Son to us at his baptism, we enter this time-sequence which will last until the day of perfect vision (cf 2 Pet 1,17-19). Here the historical facts become the doings of the Word Incarnate, which he, the Eternal

One, has accomplished and endured for us in his human nature.¹⁰ The Lord himself experienced such a time between Cana and the Cross (Jn 2,4), as he waited for the baptism of his passion and resurrection. Then he would break the bread of the scriptures for them; and they would know him, spiritually, in a single glance, as he spoke to their hearts and through the Holy Spirit taught them all truth. St Jerome tells us that this attainment of spiritual understanding is 'the passing over to Christ' — *Nos iuxta spiritum transeamus ad Christum*:¹¹ that conversion to the Lord when finally the veil is rent and the light of Christ shines on our own countenance (2 Cor 3,16-18).

The 'moral' sense of Scripture

The 'divine teaching' of the two Testaments has always been considered to be enormously more comprehensive than a body of moral precepts added to the truths of faith. In the first place there has been the constant insistence on the fundamental law of love, from Deuteronomy (6,5-9) to Paul's famous eulogy (1 Cor 13). Then there is a description of the sacred page like that of St Bernard — 'the reader of our hearts and thoughts, our food, our weapon, our medicine and our confirmation, our rest and resurrection, our consummation'.¹² When we search the scriptures with the rich young man's question, 'What must I do to possess eternal life?', we are seeking the moral sense. What we are given is an invitation to take up the life-style and objectives of Christ himself, who assures us that the Scriptures tell us the story of our redemption. A modern statement which echoes the tradition is the Vatican Council's, in its decree on the ministry and life of priests:

Christ, whom the Father sanctified and consecrated and sent into the world, 'gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds' (Tit 2,14). And so he entered into his glory through his passion. Likewise, consecrated by the anointing of the Holy Spirit and sent by Christ, priests mortify in themselves the deeds of the flesh and devote themselves entirely to the service of humankind. Thus they can grow in the holiness with which they are endowed in Christ to the point of perfect manhood (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12).

By contemplating what God has done, we know what we must do.¹³ God's doing is his love and forgiveness; his joy is in restoring and reconciling. This assurance is fastened to Jesus's own knowledge of the Father. He finds that, through the spontaneous

movement of his heart, he experiences the forgiving action of the Father. If we ask Jesus what we must do, essentially it is to manifest that perfection which is the forgiveness of the Father (Mt 5,48; Lk 6,36). So the complex prayer-process which introduces *The Spiritual Exercises*, for example, leads us through the history and mystery of the sin-laden experience of angels and humankind until the one who is meditating and contemplating must logically reason to his own question 'What must *I* do for Christ?' (Exx 53).

The heavenly city

There can be no consistently credible religion which does not communicate an authentic longing for what our civilization continues to call heaven. Man is so aware of his desires outrunning his capabilities, so often overwhelmed by his failures, so helpless in the face of evil, of what negates his search for the good; of, finally, man's inhumanity to man, that the most tragic miscalculation is fatally easy. Unless we find in our hearts the beginnings of that compunction which we can ultimately recognize as the desire for heavenly joy, then indeed hope is a dupe and religion our opium. Evil men will use its distortion as a devastating weapon of oppression; but good men will equally find themselves denying the very existence of God. If it would seem impossible to persuade man to commit his heart to the little 'that the Lord requires of you: to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic 6,8);¹⁴ then likewise he will be suspicious when he hears the apostle saying, 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom 8,18).

In fact, in order to be a true believer, one must be predestined to eternal life (Acts 13,48). In other words, our reading of the gospel must impart to us the sense of living in the end-time, when, as the negro spiritual has it, 'we can almost see the lights of the city shining down'. St Ambrose says that whilst we are still on earth we can see the heavenly mysteries in silhouette (*coelestia mysteria figurata*) by means of the gospel.¹⁵ For Origen, the heavenly age has already dawned; after the long advent of Israel's history, 'at the end of the age and in the twilight of the world', the Word has become flesh and dwelt amongst us.¹⁶ Inevitably, the apostolic preaching looks forward to the 'blessed vision of peace' out of a climate of persecution. All the truly authentic writing on the happiness of heaven — which our Easter-tide liturgical prayers petition almost to

the point of importunity — seems to have been produced during the time of persecution. One recalls the literary influence of the description in the book of Revelations of the new Jerusalem: ‘and God himself . . . will wipe away every tear from their eyes’ (Apoc 21,4).

Ah my sweet home, Jerusalem,
 Would God I were in thee!
 Would God my woes were at an end:
 Thy joys that I might see!¹⁷

Words found inscribed on the wall of the cell in the Tower of London where the sixteenth-century martyr, St Philip Howard, the Earl of Arundel, was incarcerated before his death.

The Second Vatican Council, in proclaiming the holiness to which the whole Church, God’s people, is called, chooses for its peroration the pauline exhortation: ‘The apostle has sounded the warning, “let those who deal with this world do so as though they were free of it”. For the form of this world is passing away’ (*Lumen Gentium*, 42). Though, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us, we have already ‘come to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and innumerable angels in festal gathering’ (Heb 12,22), we are still hastening towards its peace.¹⁸ We inhabit a no man’s land; we exist in an interval between the ‘here’ of Christ’s coming in history and the ‘there’ of his coming in glory. The soul still lives in the obscurity of faith, seeing by means of a dark mirror, an enigma. The essential difference between the heights of contemplation and the eternal vision remains. At the same time, there is an understanding conferred on us by the gift of faith: a gift that increases through our contemplative reflection on the mysteries of Christ in the gospel. We are invited to share with Paul the high privilege of knowing Christ the Lord and the power of his resurrection. We have not yet obtained this; but we are encouraged to press towards the *bravium*, the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil 3,7-14).

NOTES

- ¹ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. J. Walsh S.J. (New York/London, 1981), pp 244ff.
- ² Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* V, 20,4-7.
- ³ *The Letter to the Brethren of Mont-Dieu*, trans. W. Shewring, ch 15, n. 58 (London, 1930), p 100.
- ⁴ St Godric of Finchale, the fourteenth-century english hermit.
- ⁵ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. cit., pp 122-23.
- ⁶ *Apologia David altera*, III, 7 (PL XIV, 889-90).
- ⁷ Cf H. de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale* II, p 463. I am indebted to many of Fr de Lubac's insights and references.
- ⁸ *Rerum gestarum spiritualis significatio; ibid.*, p 496, n. 14.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p 535.
- ¹⁰ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, IV, xviii, 24.
- ¹¹ *Ep.*, 121, c. x.
- ¹² St Bernard, *De Diversis*, *Serm.* 24,2.
- ¹³ Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalía*, VI, V: De Lubac, II, p 552.
- ¹⁴ Cf Thomas E. Clarke, 'One road to peace', in *The Way* (July, 1982), pp 175ff.
- ¹⁵ *De Isaac et an.*, V, 42 (PL XIV, 516 A).
- ¹⁶ Origen, *In Exodu*, homily 7,14.
- ¹⁷ Laurence Anderton (J. Brerely S.J.), *The Celestial City*, 16th century; cf *The Westminster Hymnal* (London, 1964), p 294.
- ¹⁸ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmis*, CXXXI, 21.