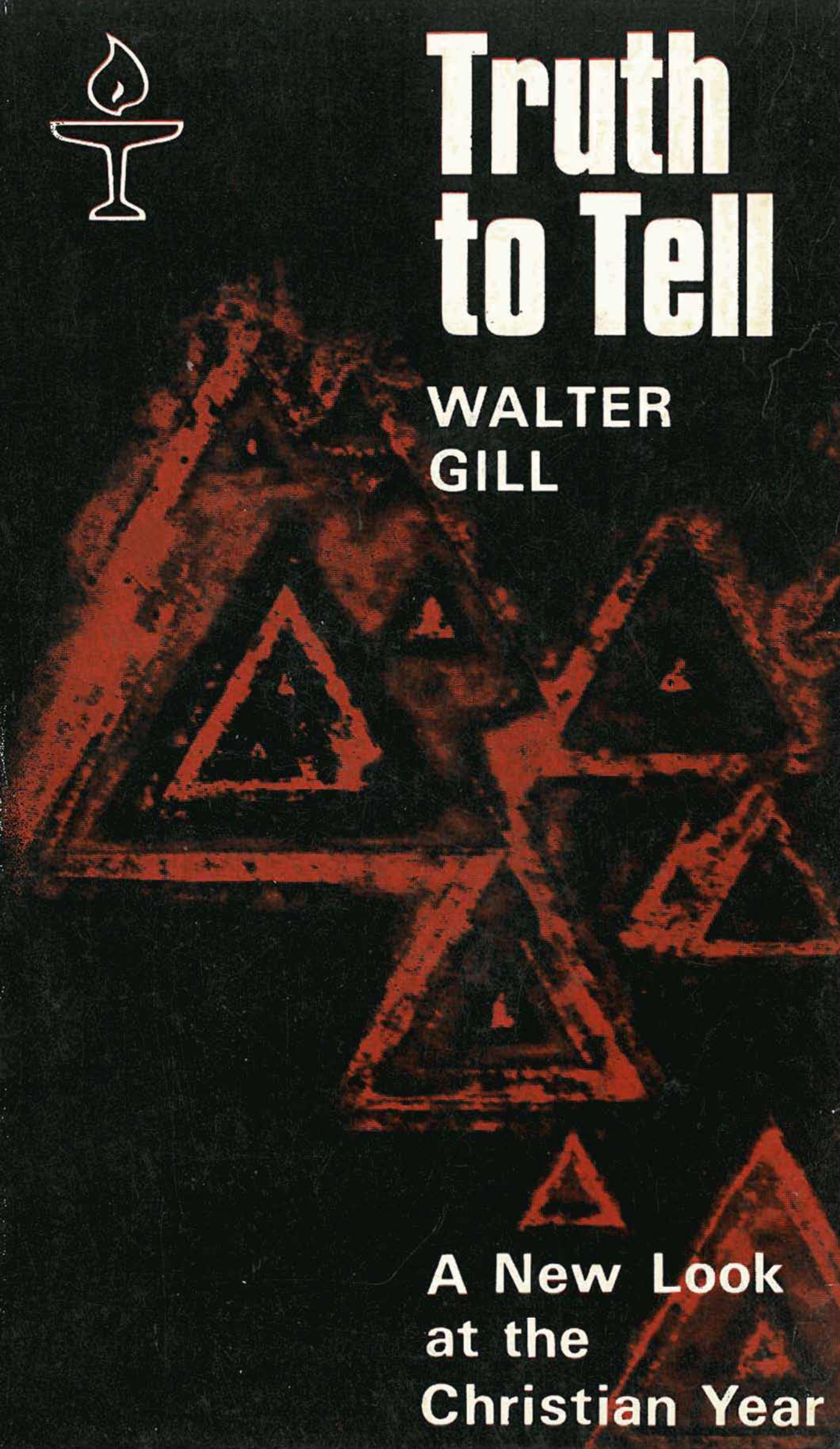
Truth to Tell

WALTER GILL



A New Look at the Christian Year

Truth to Tell

Walter Gill

'. . . that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker. . . .'

Milton

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Contents

Introduction

This is not a book of sermons, though it concludes with one. However, even that (the last I made) was composed as much for printing as for preaching. I have set it down once more because, having been prepared in the knowledge that it was likely to be the swan-song of a nearly thirty years' preaching ministry, it fittingly rounds off all else I have to say here.

A true sermon, as preached, ought to be unprintable; otherwise it is a very different thing—a read essay or a lecture, as are most of what pass for sermons today. To preach involves a rapport with the particular congregation, overtones and undertones conveyed in the manner of delivery, a slower progression of thought. In other words, it is the use of an art-form intended to be heard, and can no more be directly transposed to readable print than a novel can be taken as it stands as a script for a film.

What follows therefore is the gist of what I tried to preach, though not in the form in which I preached it. It is primarily intended for those honest doubters, more numerous than generally allowed, who still occupy pews, those from whom will arise (as Monica Furlong puts it) 'a new mutation of Christian who is willing and eager to question every item of his faith, who is bored to death with the old clichés, the old humbug and the great herd of sacred cows. . . .'

The use of the main events of the Christian calendar as chapter headings in the circumstances invites explanation. The simplest is the convenience of continuing the scheme under which I always preached. To this may be

added, however, that it represents certain basic personal convictions. Though an officially branded and quite unrepentant 'heretic', I nevertheless hold to the practical necessity of following the Christian year if the preacher is to omit no vital truth of the Christian faith. Secondly, I am thus saying I believe the need of our age is indeed a revision of traditional Christianity which, however radical, is still a revision and not the substitution of something quite different. Finally, I am hoping to show that this necessary radical revision of conventional beliefs does not have to lead to an arid intellectualism; it need mean not a loss but rather a heightening of the finest feelings associated with these traditional celebrations.

I have written because, indeed, it seems my preaching days are over. These are ecumenical times when unity *per se* is generally regarded as *summum bonum*, and external unity as the antecedent of unity of the spirit—truly a heresy if ever there was one. With a careful avoidance of theological offence characterizing the mutual approaches of the churches of major denominations, it is not surprising that the only invitations to preach since my expulsion from the Methodist ministry have come from a couple of Unitarian churches too far distant to be visited.

I do not complain, but only explain why I follow the precedent of Amos. A true preacher is essentially a practical man, and I write as a practical man. Though as well read, I hope, as any average minister, I am no academic. The work of the latter is indeed to be respected and valued. Nevertheless, in theology today, as in so many other great fields, the expert is one who knows more and more about less and less, and there is ever-growing need for synthesis. And this, however inadequate he may feel, is a task laid upon the preacher. Nor in it can he confine himself narrowly to matters theological: the whole field of human knowledge is as grist to his mill.

It is my hope that the ensuing pages will make some contribution, however small, to a rebirth of that faith

which, for speaking to the heart of human need, has still no obvious rival.

Note: The Biblical quotations in this book are all from the Revised Standard Version.

1 Advent

In a recent newspaper article the Christian calendar was criticized with especial reference to the placing of the season of Advent. The journalist complained that these four Sundays which commence the Christian year and immediately precede Christmas are no sort of preparation for the joyful celebration of the latter event. He maintained that all we got during this month as far as the pulpit was concerned were gloomy sermons on death, hell and judgment.

I find it difficult to believe that his knowledge of Advent discourses is in any way extensive. But if so, he certainly has justifiable grounds of complaint, not indeed against the season but against the preachers. For, as the collects and readings make amply plain, the whole tone is intended to be one of eager anticipation of something wonderful just round the corner, can we but be stirred to greet it. The collect for Advent Sunday itself echoes the words of the epistle appointed for that day: 'It is full time now for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light' (*Romans* 13: 11–12).

The spirit of Advent, therefore, is one of tremendous hope. It is plainly suggested that in thus opening the Christian year we have here a faith which is life-affirming and not life-denying as are some others. There is a glory to be revealed that eye has not yet seen nor ear heard; we are to ask that we may receive it, and seek that we might find: it is more than worth all the trouble.

But of course suggestions are not enough. Since we live in a world of men who lack nothing so much as intense hope to draw them on to achievement, we shall, if we are wise, give pause for such a faith to have a hearing. But the pause need not be a long one unless it soon begins to speak in accents manifestly true and relevant.

The Advent hope is that of Christ's coming again. This is a theme which urgently needs to be demythologized if it is to mean anything in the twentieth century. One thing is certain: we shall not make sense of the thought of a second Advent unless first we can do so in relation to the original coming. Here we are reaching down to the bedrock of history; for, whatever else we may or may not say about him, no reasonable man can any longer deny that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical character. As to what manner of man he was, and whether he still has anything to say to our generation in its pressing needs, these problems call for a consideration of our basic sources for the life he lived and the background against which he lived it.

How appropriate therefore that the second Sunday in Advent should be widely observed as Bible Sunday in accordance with the collect for the day which petitions that we may 'hear . . . read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest' the scriptures. And the question immediately arises as to how this can best be done.

Myself, I am convinced that the Bible must be read like any other ancient book: only then does it appear that in fact it is not like any other ancient book. To approach it with a fixed theory about its special inspiration is to have decided in advance that religion is a separable addition to life, which in fact the Bible taken as a whole does not teach, and Jesus' own outlook denies at every turn.

When I was a boy we used to sing:

> Guard the Bible well;
> All its foes repel.

The implication was that unless we shouted aloud its supposed 'infallibility' to scare off profane readers the poor old Bible would decidedly have a thin time. But the Bible does not need to be defended—only understood. Then it is perfectly capable of looking after itself. As I and many others can attest from our own experience, at its noblest it speaks repeatedly to our human condition at the deepest levels of our being. Supremely is this so in what it has to tell of Jesus of Nazareth. Only the other day I suffered a series of disappointments, a common enough experience of 'it never rains but it pours.' Being a slow learner, I was rankled and plunged into gloom for a while. The poison was only removed when Paul's 'I rejoice in my sufferings . . . , in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions' (*Colossians* 1: 24) came into my mind. I remembered 'Jesus . . . , who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame' (*Hebrews* 12: 2). I was enabled to put my poor little sufferings alongside his as a widow's mite towards the same grand end of the transformation of the whole human race into the sons of God. It is an honour so to endure; and in that realization I began immediately to find freedom and peace and new energy. Thus the Bible can show us still how to cope, how ordinary folk can find the confidence that they matter—just where they are. And all this without having to leave our critical questioning minds at home when we go out to read the Book. Where there is chaff, by all means let us separate it from the wheat; but I have yet to hear a man confronted with a field of ripe golden corn complain that it is not worth reaping since half of it is chaff.

But, to return to Christ's first coming, we are fortunate indeed to possess in one volume his cultural background (the Old Testament), his life (the Gospels), and the immediate historical effects (the rest of the New Testament). The first and the third of these are needed to bring out the full meaning of the second. These are enough to make real sense, but other assistance from sources like the Apocrypha and the works of Josephus is not to be despised.

All these call for fuller examination as the Christian year proceeds. At this stage all we can observe is that on the human plane we are dealing with a life which historically is unique. Here is one whose penetrating vision of the meaning of life still astounds by its heights and depths. His incredibly clear perception that real life is essentially personal, enabling him to screen the gold from the dross in the wisdom of the ancients, is matched only by his persistence in following the vision to its ultimate end in the cross and thereby beyond. From his baptism by John his religious consciousness is focused in the call to inaugurate the Kingdom of God within the framework of his own generation. It is a Kingdom at once personal, social, universal; it is a revolutionizing of human nature, enabling men and nations truly to be what they really are; it is a life which fulfils rather than destroys, which possesses, purifies and ennobles. It is to the Jews first, to transmute, not suppress, their ardent nationalism, calling them to wreak upon their enemies persistent good for every evil and jauntily go with them twain for every mile compelled. In all this to know one is being Godlike, partaking of the nature of life itself, moving to a victory that is never in question.

Since at his first advent Jesus so completely embodied the life of this Kingdom, it is fitting at this season to ask more particularly who this is who so came amongst men. Was Jesus Divine? He would not refuse to be called Son of God who himself invited others to become children of their Father which is in heaven. Yet we should be careful in our definitions lest by them we come to think we have enclosed the indefinable—to our great loss. To declare Jesus Divine in the sense of gilding the lily as if some attribute had been added to his human personality would indeed be to set him apart from all other possible men. But it would be an apartness leaving desperate men to share the poor demoniac's cry, 'What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?' (*Mark* 5: 7).

We can press upon him a cheap glory that effectively insulates us from his influence. Alas that the Church so often has fallen into the trap, supporting its case with an appeal to miraculous birth stories, degrading these wonderful mythologies by treating them as the literal history which they manifestly are not. There is warning in the word, 'No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (*1 Corinthians* 12: 3). By any other spirit, by clever juggling with words, 'You shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in' (*Matthew* 23: 13).

Truly to declare Jesus Divine is therefore always an affirmation of living faith. It is a recognition of our total situation as we perceive it and by which we will live. It is primarily a declaration about God, that the character of Ultimate Reality is indeed as revealed in human terms in Jesus. And since we can only worship in human terms, to venerate the Master is the most effective way in which we can venerate God.

But since all this completeness resided in Jesus, why should we yearn as we do in Advent for his coming again? Is such an event desirable, and what can be meant by it? It is true that if we dispose of a miraculous birth, by the same token we dispose of any future miraculous 'hole in the sky' descent. Nevertheless there is important meaning in the thought of Christ's further advent. We see Jesus, but 'we do not yet see everything in subjection to him' (*Hebrews* 2: 8). On the best authority we pray 'Thy Kingdom come'; and, since the life of the Kingdom of God was embodied in Jesus, he comes again wherever and whenever that Kingdom is manifested. He has already come in every spiritual, moral and social movement which, down the centuries, he has inspired. And since the life of the Kingdom as Jesus proclaimed it is in the deepest sense natural to man, fulfilling his real nature, and since consequently every departure from that life brings its own inherent harsh consequences to which the pages of history

bear constant witness, we have the right to confident hope that the day will dawn when mankind shall fully learn of him, when he, though invisible to mortal eye, shall have come amongst us fully in the final establishment of his Kingdom.

We seek such a coming now; it was never more needed than in the age in which mankind (though pitifully incompetent to handle it) has achieved the power to destroy itself. Never was the prayer of the Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent more urgent and apposite than it is today: 'O Lord, raise up (we pray thee) thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us. . . .'

How long can we wait? For faithful and understanding hearts the time need not be long: only to the end of Advent, to Christmas Day.

2 Christmas

There is a magic about Christmas. I am not thinking of the pseudo-magic still peddled in great quantities at this season in the name of religion to astound the weak-minded. I am thinking of the real magic which stirs the hearts of most people, young and old alike. You can see it stirs their hearts because it touches their pockets. It may be true that a lot of presents are bought because we have no courage to break with the fact that they are expected of us; but it is also true that it is the best collecting time of the whole year for good causes to which we do not have to contribute. And men must have hard hearts who can sneer at an annual celebration whose power could halt the war on the Western Front in defiance of orders in 1914, and even touch the heart of Hitler to cease bombing for three days at the height of the blitz in 1940.

Yet there is a confusion of thought about the season, especially in the minds of many earnest thinking Christians, which gives rise to a sense of depression and loneliness whenever in the midst of preparations and enjoyment they pause to think what it is all about—depression because they feel honesty of thought about Christmas compels so much loss, loneliness because from all they ever hear of its meaning nobody else seems to have an inkling of their problem. They seldom talk about it, generously desiring not to spoil the happiness of others who seem untroubled. That is why they so often feel they are just the odd one out when, to my certain knowledge, they are part of an ever-increasing number.

Their problem is that in virtually every Christmas service they attend or hear over the air they feel they are

being asked to assume without any question whatsoever that the entire bag of nativity stories is indubitably literally historically true. They are right: that is precisely what they are being asked to believe. Only the other day at a carol service I listened to a preacher musing as to whether the oldest or the youngest shepherd stayed behind to look after the flocks while the rest after hearing the angels went down to Bethlehem. This kind of thing is quite typical. It is also, though no doubt unconsciously so, quite unscrupulous. When preachers complain of commercial exploitation of the warm feelings of Christmas, they would do well to remember the adage about people who live in glass houses: they are usually equally guilty of its ecclesiastical exploitation.

The thoughtful questioners I have in mind do not usually doubt that somewhere in Palestine, near two thousand years ago, a Jewish peasant woman bore a child who grew to be the man Jesus of Nazareth. But they do query all the other supposed facts attached to the event. Sometimes they know, though it does not greatly trouble them, that we are in complete ignorance as to the actual date of Christ's birth and that the choice in the fourth century of 25 December was purely arbitrary, designed to supplant the pagan Roman Saturnalia celebrated on that day.

What does trouble them however is the absurdly miraculous setting of the birth involved in literal acceptance of the traditional stories. Though often unable to analyse here, they feel somehow that the whole business is unworthy of God as Jesus himself taught us to know him. They are in fact asked to believe that Christ had to be born as a biologically unique case of human parthenogenesis, fully announced in advance through convenient dreams and celestial appearances; that the birth itself was accompanied by an all-time justification of astrology—the correct interpretation of the appearance of a comet which eventually swooped so low in the sky that it was possible

to distinguish in a small town the particular house immediately under it; and that the event was also signalled by an appearance of angels in the sky duly observed by watchers in latitude 31° 42′ N, longitude 35° 12′ E. Subsequent divine interventions in dreams of the astrologers and Joseph served to save the child from the wrath of Herod, though apparently it did not occur to Deity to warn the parents of other Bethlehem children at the same time—as a result of which lapse those under two years of age were unfortunately murdered. No doubt I am verging on the blasphemous here, and there was no lapse; after all, there was a prophecy which had to be fulfilled about Rachel weeping for her children, so the whole matter was sewn up quite neatly.

But I must control my feelings and merely observe that the doubters are quite right: literal acceptance of these stories in this day and age can only result in an unconscious disrespect for the character of God and a similar suspicion of the apparent humanity of Jesus such as poisons the whole effect of reading the rest of the gospel story.

What then in these circumstances should the honest Christian do? Seek to abolish these legends? If so, the carols and Christmas pictures will have to be abolished with them. In fact would there be really anything worth keeping left of the Christian Christmas we have known? After all, as we have seen, even the commemorative date of Jesus' birth is without foundation.

Abolish Christmas, then? We would not be the first Christians to attempt this: the Puritans tried to do it by law under the Cromwellian régime, though without permanent success. But is this perhaps a more appropriate time to abandon the Christian festival and leave the field clear once again for the purely secular saturnalia which for so many outside the influence of the churches has in practice already replaced it?

Why do we quail at the thought, as we do? Because, in

spite of all our logic, we still feel that abolition would involve us in a great sense of loss. We are not thinking only of the rich traditions the celebration has gathered to itself down the years—the parties, the cards, the decorations, the Christmas trees, turkeys and puddings, presents, Santa Claus, Handel's *Messiah*, Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. After all, most of these could simply be transferred to the secular mid-winter festival; indeed, some of them originated with it and are older than Christmas. No: there is something more, and we cannot define it. Perhaps we can discover it and more than preserve it if, in spite of everything, we can bring ourselves to look at the Christmas stories again, but in a new way.

How did these birth stories arise in the first place?

There are two distinct sets of them, one in the first gospel ('The Wise Men') and the other in the third ('The Shepherds'). They agree on only one point—that Jesus was born in Bethlehem—and even this, from the background of Jewish Messianic expectations, is a tradition which could be anticipated to arise whether or not it was founded in historic fact. Even the virgin birth is referred to clearly only in Matthew, though Luke's account represents an advanced stage towards such a belief. Both sets belong to the latest strata of synoptic gospel tradition; that is to say they represent ideas held by second or third generation Christians about the middle of the second half of the first century.

These myths (and we do them no real discredit to call them that) grew up in an age unaccustomed to making clear distinction between historical fact and its meaning. They are to be understood therefore as poetical and pictorial expressions, not origins, of faith in Jesus Christ. They look back to his birth through all he had become for men in the life he had lived; they enshrine, and richly enshrine, the noble living present experience of those early Christians. That is to say they knew Jesus to be the man in whose presence they felt the unclouded presence

of God; in his very weakness he had revealed the strength which cannot be overthrown. Hence he had proved himself the answer to the deepest needs of wise and simple alike; he was the guiding star to men lost in the darkness of the world. Truly understood, all this and much more is expressed in these matchless stories.

But how can they mean all this to us who live in a different age with different thought-forms? Can such stories still play a part in a twentieth-century honest celebration of Christmas? They can: the poets give us the clue. It is a remarkable fact that the majority of our favourite Christmas hymns and carols are written in the present tense. They do not speak of the Christmas story having happened; they speak of it happening, here and now.

Here then is the secret of Christmas. It is not a remembrance of past events, though it is indeed essentially related to him who was born as we were born, who lived and died for men. The truth of Christmas is that it is eternally present, and the stories, though not historical, are eternally true. We enter into them by the exercise of imaginative faith, the poetic gift that lies buried in every one of us. And the world of imaginative faith is a real world; its reality is to be seen in the reality of its results, in quickened hearts and nobler lives.

The centuries of celebration have their effect, as do the millions of faithful souls on each other who still celebrate it. I write this only two days before Christmas, looking for that day when, just after midnight, Christ will be born. He will be born then because these millions in imaginative faith and love will be at his cradle to greet him. He will be born in measure even in the hearts of many who do not know what they believe but who pause in their merry-making as the clock strikes and say with a sudden gladness, 'It is Christmas Day!'—and wish themselves better than they have been.

We shall need no longer to trouble ourselves over the

mythical shepherds and wise men of long ago; for we shall be the shepherds and the wise men as we say one to another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem . . . and see. . . .' We shall return by a different road; we shall return rejoicing and praising God.

Christ comes again on every Christmas Day. If we could but seek him knowing whom we seek, he who in our generation alone has twice halted a war would halt them and all man's inhumanity to man forever. He would come in all his glory.

3 Epiphany

The Epiphany, on 6 January, the celebration of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, is a festival of the western church almost as old as the celebration of Christmas Day itself. Yet it still comes as rather a surprise to the popular mind that traditionally the church has not thought of the wise men reaching the cradle of Jesus until the twelfth day after the nativity. However, there is a decided advantage in thus separating the supposed first contact of non-Jews with Christ, even if we do tend to forget it on 25 December. It gives us a special opportunity to remember the essential universality of the Gospel, set down in the epistle for the day which recalls 'how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus' (*Ephesians* 3: 6).

It is a theme of which those of us who profess the faith need constant reminder. For, though the division to be healed was originally that between Jews and non-Jews, every age produces its own version of 'the Gentiles', those not in practice recognized as needing to be brought within the one family. The recognition would be perhaps more fully made if we saw more clearly wherein the true universality of Jesus actually lay.

It is not in fact as obvious as popularly assumed. The idea that he spent his time teaching large abstractions, the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all mankind, is a fiction unsupported by evidence. Jesus was a Jew, and like a Jew he thought and spoke in concrete terms. Moreover his mission was directed to his own people: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (*Matthew* 15: 24). It is true that this sprang from no narrowness of

sympathies; he who made the hero of his parable of neighbourhood a Samaritan also commends the Roman centurion of Capernaum: 'Truly, I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (*Matthew* 8: 10–11). Nevertheless, the universalism of Jesus is infinitely more than the kindly tolerance that recognizes good in all men.

The best of his fellow-countrymen believed that as a people they had a mission to witness to religious and moral standards infinitely higher than those of the rest of the world. But they believed also that Jews could only maintain the purity of their standards if they surrounded their national life with a protective barrier. The ritual laws, circumcision and the like, provided just such a national defence mechanism, however irrational they might otherwise appear.

Jesus' whole approach however was the antithesis of such defensive reactions. He simply ignored such so-called requirements of the national life and proclaimed the things which could speak to all men. We can see this in that men of so many different centuries and cultures (including our own) have found his teachings eminently readable. For him the life of the Kingdom of God needed no protection since it was to be lived in what, contrary to appearances, was still in truth God's world. Thus, for nations as well as individuals, he who sought defensively to save his life would lose it, and he who was ready to lose his life would discover he had found it. In practice it meant that instead of loftily calling publicans and sinners to repentance he befriended and mixed with them regardless of the scandal he was giving to the respectable.

The infant church, or at least a substantial portion of it, soon saw sufficient of the implications to embark on its successful missions to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. It was soon proclaiming that Jesus

Christ was 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel' (*Luke* 2: 32), and that 'the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men' (*Titus* 2: 11).

But we must ask ourselves, especially at the season of Epiphany, who are the new 'Gentiles' of our time and sphere of living, and what new 'losing our life to save it' attitudes are now demanded of us in loyalty to the Kingdom of God. The various racial and national tensions spring easily to mind, of course, but it should be borne in mind that it is easy to be pious about them at a distance and thus mistakenly think we fulfil the law of the Gospel. I knew a woman who worked for overseas missions for years but, when the problem caught up with her, did her utmost to prevent the house next door from being sold to a coloured family, for fear it would reduce the value of her own.

But, for professed and practising Christians everywhere, there is one large group of 'Gentiles' on their very doorsteps. If the church is indeed, as the New Testament suggests, the company of 'the new Israel', then the new 'Gentiles' for whom Christ also died are those who feel it has nothing to do with them—in short, the non-churchgoers. And if the old Israel was rejected from the purposes of God because it took up entrenched positions behind protective barriers as if religion and morality needed defence by something else, what will be the fate of the so-called new Israel if it adopts similar attitudes? It will share the same rejection.

The signs are that the major denominations are reacting more and more into this position. They are giving up hope of being able to communicate with men and women in the swiftly changing world around them. Their individual churches grow more and more introverted, existing for themselves alone or for the few families they still contain. The ecumenical movement is primarily a defence mechanism, as may be seen from the stereotyped conven-

tionality of the suggested bases of union between denominations. They are designed to give thicker protection to larger groupings, as is the new theological basis recently adopted by the British Council of Churches from the World Council of Churches—which also squeezes out the too free fringe of the Quakers and the Unitarians who are a nuisance when it comes to defensive measures, as they are of course also always a possible source of now unwanted new light.

But God never leaves himself without witnesses; what is needed and will presently arise from the total situation is a new manifestation of the truly universal Church of Christ which will be a growing developing organism instead of a dead organization. Already there are signs, as in the tremendous, even hungry response to the Bishop of Woolwich's *Honest to God*, and to the works produced by the group of Cambridge scholars under the leadership of Dr A R Vidler.

The glorious life of the Kingdom of God is revealed only in the realization that there is no person or group of persons who we can do without. Every manifestation of the new Israel must embrace its new Gentiles or else drift back into the limbo of the old Israel. We professing Christians will find the living word of God for today, the relevant word for our own needs, only as we go out in love and humility seeking to understand why our present work and message is disregarded as irrelevant, as it is. We need humility, because we have assumed God has nothing to say to us through the 'outsider' while in fact he has much; we need love, because only real sympathy and patience can catch beneath confident voices the undertones of a need we share in common. In thus hearing and thus sharing, the life of the Kingdom of God will be kindled in us afresh, and for those without as well as those within. We shall discover again for our generation 'a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel' (*Luke* 2: 32).

4 Lent

In the church calendar the period of Lent is traditionally celebrated as a very solemn season, a fast of forty days (excluding Sundays) leading through Good Friday to its end in the joyous occasion of Easter Day. For those who appreciate the Christian year, it is a time of due preparation, by meditation and, for those with high church principles, by abstinence, for a fitting celebration of Christ's passion. Nevertheless, the origin of Lent is not to be found in the events which closed the earthly ministry of Jesus but indeed in those which opened it. It is because of the assumption that this ministry lasted exactly three years and was immediately preceded by his forty days' fasting in the wilderness that we thus come to be celebrating beginnings and endings both at once. And this is no bad thing. As the cross can be truly understood only in the light of all that Jesus taught and did before he came to it, so then it is not too much to say that if we misunderstand what Jesus was doing in the wilderness at the beginning of his mission we shall equally misunderstand what he was doing in dying at the end of it. And we do misunderstand.

It is, for instance, taken for granted that the forty days was a gloomy period in the life of Jesus. Much is made of the loneliness, hunger, lack of shelter, and the supposed misery of temptation. It is time we cut loose from such an assumption. The hint is given in the gospel accounts themselves: 'And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and *afterward* he was hungry' (*Matthew* 4: 2). Or: '*When they were ended*, he was hungry' (*Luke* 4: 2). In other words he certainly did not fast with a view to 'mortifying the flesh', since he was quite unaware of being hungry until the end

of the period—whatever length that may have been, 'forty days' being the biblical equivalent of our 'some considerable time' or 'a few weeks'. In fact, in his later teaching and actions he exhibits no enthusiasm for such 'mortification'. Very soon he was having to be asked: 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' (*Mark* 2: 18). His answer was so lighthearted in its depreciation of fasting that even the earliest gospel writer feels he must add an obvious insertion to square it with the practice of the church which had already reverted to this form of religious abstinence.

The proper question therefore is not, 'Why did Jesus fast?' but, 'Why did he go into the wilderness?' If you insisted on living in that desolate area, you had to expect to eat little because there was little to eat, and it seems plain that Jesus simply accepted the situation. He went into the wilderness because that was the only place where you could find privacy for prolonged thinking; and he had some prolonged thinking to do. To understand why, we have to remember that he had just been baptized by John in the Jordan. He had felt he ought to identify himself with the exciting and searching mission of the Baptist who was declaring that God's deliverer of the people was about to be revealed.

In the moment of baptism a mighty experience had come upon Jesus. It seemed to him that the surging power of the Holy Spirit was in the voice of vision which divinely declared to him, 'Thou art my beloved Son' (*Mark* 1: 11). He knew himself there and then to be the appointed one to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, to minister no less than total salvation to all mankind. It was therefore in a state of tremendous excitement and burning zeal that Jesus felt he must get away at once to think the whole thing out and discern his immediate lines of action. Little wonder that, thus absorbed, he was not conscious of hunger.

Far from being a gloomy period, then, they were more probably the happiest days of his life. Even his 'temptations' are not to be thought of primarily as things giving him pain. There was inner struggle indeed, to discern and reject second-rate ideas and second-best lines of action as the work of the devil, but his dominant sensation was one of exhilaration. It was as though 'the angels ministered to him' (*Mark* 1: 13) as he began to perceive intelligible and practical form in which his vision must be expressed. It is a parallel spirit of adventurous discernment and application which is needed for a true celebration of Lent today. And it will assist us along productive lines of thought if we consider first the real nature of the 'temptations', and why Jesus rejected them as such. For in essence they are not only his: they come in one form or another to all who would follow him. As Dostoevsky in his story *The Grand Inquisitor* makes beautifully plain, the tragedy of Christian history has been the frequent and eager yielding of the church to such temptations as if indeed they were wisdom from above.

The story of the temptations is of course figurative. Any suggestion of the devil appearing in person, even if it be allowed that such a person could possibly exist, destroys the reality of temptation as far as any good man is concerned. Following the order of the first gospel, then, the first temptation (to turn stones into bread) becomes Jesus' thought to gain a strong following by limiting his opening appeal to man's most obvious need—for bread. He refuses this way because it is to treat men as less than fully human. The second temptation is to doubt that he has really been called to the ultimate in vocations, or at least to doubt whether others can be convinced of it through normal human channels. Some superhuman sign perhaps, like leaping off the Temple pinnacle and landing unhurt, to bolster confidence on both sides? But no. This is to attempt to put God on trial; it is to suggest that he does not already fully reveal his purpose and his power through the

everyday. And the third temptation, with the astonishing military success of the Maccabees in the back of his mind, is to bring in the Kingdom by thus seizing the kingdoms. But this involves doing evil that good may come, and is refused as an impossibility in the nature of things; in terms of worship it is to bow down to the devil that one may bow down to God.

In thus rejecting these ways, Jesus had left only one other open. If men cannot be bought, caught nor fought into the Kingdom, then they must be sought. In that decision, though as yet invisible, the cross was already implicit. It is implicit also for the Christian and the church: only in the defencelessness of that love which is persistent goodwill in action can we be defended by him whose name and nature is such love. The cross is not something to be sheltered behind, but something to be shared that we may also share its glory.

The inevitability of the cross, if he followed his chosen way to its limits, was revealed to Jesus by stages in the course of his ministry. And any full Lenten meditation must take account of those stages if finally, by Good Friday, Jesus' death is to be in any true way intelligible to us. We begin with the strategy and tactics he had in mind when he left the wilderness.

It is a common and mistaken assumption that Jesus had no need for such planning. The usual ideas are that he sought only to save men individually and not mankind socially, that his mind was on 'eternal' things which excluded interest in the world-situation of his own time, that since from the outset his aim was to die sacrificially the teaching and healing of the interval was comparatively unimportant. If these things really were so, it would be hard indeed to see in him any relevance to life as we must live it. Fortunately, however, we have in Mark (the earliest gospel) a distinct historical outline of the ministry which could hardly have been invented. Fortunately, too, Schweitzer has rubbed our noses in the fact that Jesus

accepted and used the popular apocalyptic thought-forms of his day, though we are by no means bound to this scholar's view that the Master was shackled by them. But with these two factors in mind it is possible at least to glimpse the astonishing boldness of what Jesus was seeking to do.

Briefly, he embarked on a plan for revolutionizing the life of mankind within that generation: 'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power' (*Mark* 9: 1). He aimed to seize on the expectant nationalism of the Jews and re-direct its fanatical power from destructive to constructive ends. The people of God were indeed to conquer the world, but by the most persistent returning of good for evil converting enemies to friends. There would inevitably be a period during which they had to endure 'the woes of the Messiah', but it would be but the precursor to final victory if they endured to the end. Indeed, even in the worst moments of such a calling they would find their truest happiness or 'blessedness' because they would already be themselves within the kingdom of God.

The tactics of Jesus were well-designed to implement this strategy. Healing and teaching were all of a piece under the watch-cry of 'The kingdom of God is at hand. . . !' as he directed himself first and foremost to his own people. He sent out disciples in advance on his tour to whip up the sense of expectancy and to learn for themselves the power of the Kingdom independent of his presence with them. He taught in parables which stressed the activity of God in the everyday, designed to separate the wheat from the chaff among his hearers, giving fuller teaching to those who came forward as a result. These he again sent out, as with the smaller earlier group. In all these systematic moves to capture the real heart of the nation he said nothing of his own messianic consciousness; if the movement was to roll forward, it would finally have

to be without dependence on a visible leader, especially when the transformed Israel really began its altruistic advance upon the Gentile world.

His initial success in Galilee was amazingly swift. He knew it had to be: time was not on the side of any prophet influencing multitudes in that world. The arrest of the Baptist had been the signal to Jesus to start his own mission, and now the execution of the former seems to have impelled him to bring his work immediately to the crisis point. This appears to have been centred on the incident known as the Feeding of the Multitude, recorded by all the gospel-writers in six accounts altogether. None of the evangelists more than partially grasps the significance of this event for Jesus, but collectively they give all the hints we need. The occasion seems to have been a deliberate secret gathering by him of all his would-be disciples, possibly some thousands in number, with the intention of equipping them to be scattered among the nation as the lively leaven of the Kingdom. This he did first by teaching (probably the equivalent of the Sermon on the Mount) and then, when food seemed to be running short, by practical demonstration—the open giving away of his own last remnants of food inspiring a warm-hearted general sharing revealing that there was more than enough for all. But the latter event, instead of turning their faces outward, trusting the life of the Kingdom to see them through, turned their enthusiasm inward, to keep together as an army with Jesus as their king. By what can only have been a masterly handling of the crowd he thwarted their reactionary hopes, but it meant that his own work to that point was in ruins. He could not begin again in Galilee: Antipas would never forgive such a gathering; in his territory Jesus would be more immediately marked for arrest than John had been.

So Jesus retreated with his immediate disciples to foreign parts to re-formulate his strategy. (He never seems even to have thought of giving up.) Slowly he came to his

decision. Since even his closest and blindly loyal friends had but the dimmest notion of what he was about, all must now turn on his own personal effort. He would aim directly at the heart of the nation for the last throw, at Jerusalem at its most crowded, at Passover time, and beyond the jurisdiction of Antipas.

He had no illusions as to the gamble he was taking. Failure to make the wheel of the Kingdom turn there meant death. But even so, God's will could not be thwarted. Jesus would bear 'the woes of the Messiah' alone. Then the Kingdom would come.

5 Holy Week

The last week of Lent has been specially celebrated ever since regular church festivals began. In the earlier weeks it is possible, as it were, to approach the passion of Jesus Christ quietly, but from Palm Sunday onward we are plunged into the rough-and-tumble events of the last week of his earthly life of which the gospels give such detailed accounts. No Christian would wish to quarrel with its hallowed title; yet 'Holy Week' does somehow suggest something decorous and dignified, while the actual week was one of seemingly reckless uproar with Jesus himself the instigator of it all.

Yet from beginning to end one is conscious that it was no disorder to him. The initiative is in his hands throughout, and for two reasons. First, his burning zeal of unified love to God and man left no room in him for that dualism of thought and double-mindedness of will which makes us so unsure of ourselves. Here is the basic reason why he who combined fire with tenderness and wordly wisdom with readiness to trust gives such a plain impression of cool unhurried audacity in action. Second, his tactics were brilliant to the last: he was always one move ahead of his enemies who were thwarted in their desire for a quiet hole-in-a-corner suppression of this trouble-maker.

Right from the start, on what we now call Palm Sunday, he threw down the gauntlet in his very manner of entry to the Holy City. It was a carefully arranged triumphal procession staking a claim not by words but by deed to Messiahship of a very definite kind. No Jew could fail to call to mind the passage from the prophet Zechariah, the latter part of which is often forgotten:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass.
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
and the war horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

(*Zechariah* 9: 9–10)

According to the earliest account (Mark's) this was all he did that day, leaving time for the meaning of the demonstration to sink in. But on Monday, with even greater dramatic force, he cleared the Court of Gentiles in the Temple of all its traffic, with scant concern for the commercial necessities of the sacrificial system, claiming by the words of Jeremiah a divine universal mission in so doing. He was giving his fellow-countrymen a final chance to repent their narrow nationalism and make some gesture of reconciliation towards the Gentiles in their midst.

They did not take it. This, then, he knew was the final end of his earliest hopes. To stay in the city now could mean only death to him; yet he refused to run away. Instead, he quietly ensured that the time and place would be of *his* choosing, not that of his implacable and influential foes. Meanwhile he was ready to spend his remaining days in public argument with them, that all might know where he stood and what they were really doing. What he himself was really doing he endeavoured to make plain to the Twelve in a last private supper with them, the night before the Passover. As Luke tells us, in what seems to be the most primitive account, he turned it into an anticipation of the Messianic banquet. The coming Kingdom was near

because his own death, through which it would be accomplished, was also near. He summed it all up in the simplest and most profound symbol when, in breaking bread as host, he handed it to them with the words 'This is my body'.

Indeed he was giving his body to death that the life of the kingdom of God which was in him might be made available for all who would partake. The church has done well to make the incident the basis of its central act of worship, but badly in surrounding its simplicity with an aura of miracle and superstition, and so often isolating it from the preaching of the personality of Jesus without which it is mere ritualistic self-indulgence.

If to state this causes offence, it may be profitable to remember that Jesus spent his last week doing little else but cause offence, especially to those of a comfortable ecclesiastical frame of mind. In those few turbulent days he managed to hurt or offend just about everybody. He began by offending the orthodox religious folk when they, the Pharisees, protested against the Galilean pilgrims shouting almost divine praises of him, brusquely replying 'If these were silent, the very stones would cry out' (*Luke* 19: 40). He offended the respectable churchgoing businessmen by throwing them and their wares out of the Temple, the religious leaders of the nation by as good as telling them, in the parable of the wicked husbandmen, that they were the kind who had murdered the Prophets and were intent on worse things yet, the nationalists by refusing to declare that Jews ought not to pay taxes to Caesar, and the utilitarian moralists by stoutly defending the woman who had just poured £50 worth of ointment on his head instead of giving the money to the poor. He even hurt his own loyal friends. He hurt Judas by not going ahead with a 'sensible' military revolt while the people were still with him, causing that disciple to try desperately to force his hand with a pretended betrayal which in the circumstances turned out to be a real be-

trayal (to Judas' anguished despair). He hurt the rest of them by refusing to let them put this matter right in doing the one thing they felt they could do for him, fighting for him: 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword' (*Matthew* 26: 52). Still he had not finished: he offended the theologians, for the time was now past for keeping hidden things which should be made known. ' "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am. . . ." And the high priest tore his mantle, and said, ". . . blasphemy" ' (*Mark* 14: 61–63). And, offending all these, he could not fail to offend another body, the police, as a disturber of the peace. Before them, even before Pilate himself, he maintained what seemed to be a stubborn silence. But because he remained quiet and unresisting in their hands, even when brought out into a public place, he finally offended even the ordinary people who so recently had been shouting his praises. They didn't like the police: hitherto they had regarded Jesus as their prospective champion against them, but if, as it seemed, he had not the spirit even now to utter a single rallying cry to them, they were finished with him.

So in that one week he had offended everybody, and simply by being himself in the time of crisis. Truly, Paul never more aptly quoted the Old Testament than when he said, 'As it is written, Behold I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall'. But he did well to complete the quotation: 'And he who believes in him will not be put to shame' (*Romans* 9: 33). Let none forget Gethsemane. If he could have given the Kingdom without this naked revelation of ourselves to ourselves, he would.

6 Good Friday

I have known children question the title of this day. Fewer adults do so, but from unthinking habit rather than perception as far as the rest are concerned. So it is good for the matter to be raised, if only out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. It draws attention to the basic soundness of the church's instincts, a faith at least originally adventurous enough to be paradoxical, in that it gave the day of Christ's execution the reverse of the prefix 'bad'. This bouquet needs first to be presented to keep a proper sense of balance in the hurling of brickbats which must follow.

It is a miracle that anybody has made sense and good religion out of Jesus' voluntary death when one considers how persistently down the centuries Christian teachers have interpreted the passion by almost any criterion save the valid one: his own life and teaching. Most of the traditional theories of the atonement reflect to some degree against the moral character of Deity. Some of them are downright immoral, as, for instance, one of the earliest which held the field for almost a millennium, that Christ's soul was a ransom paid for the souls of sinners to the devil who, after honourably fulfilling his part of the bargain, was then twisted out of his due payment. If later theories were more refined and less blatant, many of them were only so by comparison with this justification of commercial sharp practice.

Present-day Good Friday preaching (and it has been my misfortune to hear much of it at united services and on radio) usually avoids specific references to these historic theories while presenting many of their assumptions as if

they were self-evident truth. 'Christ died for our sins', or 'Christ died to make it possible for God to forgive us our sins', with forgiveness thought of as primarily remission of punishment, are dominating themes, and are expected to be found relevant by people who in fact are no longer worried about their sins. This is probably often realized by the preachers, but they feel themselves bound to continue these theological platitudes because they have nothing else to say about the death of Christ. Their huge basic traditional and often quite unexamined assumption is that the meaning of Christ's death is virtually exclusively concerned with the forgiveness of human sin.

This is all part of what Dr Percy Dearmer called 'the sin obsession' which has bedevilled Christian teaching almost from the beginning with talk, not only of sinning and sins, but also of an abstract something called 'sin' which invisibly infected our nature and alienated us from God just as much as actual sins, even if we should lead blameless lives. Fortunately, Jesus himself was not so bedevilled. According to the synoptic gospels, this abstract 'sin' played no part in his teaching; even his use of the word 'sins' can be about numbered on the fingers of one hand—and even there it is usually in giving some poor guilt-ridden creature a simple assurance that they are forgiven.

Now it is true, of course, that the death of Jesus can bear vital relation to the receiving of real forgiveness (being reconciled to God and themselves) by those whose problem this is. It is true also that those suffering from buried guilt (and, as the psychiatrists are showing us, they are many) may have it brought to the surface if they dare to have an honest look at the people actively or passively concerned in securing the crucifixion. They were not super-villains; by present average standards they were mostly average decent people. Caiaphas was a typical ecclesiastical statesman, as Pilate was a typical high-ranking civil servant, both devoted to the importance of men of their quality continuing to wield power by the use

of the art of compromise; the disappointed crowd behaved as have disappointed crowds in every age and clime. If we do not recognize ourselves at some stage of our lives somewhere among the people at the foot of the cross, it can only mean that we have not really looked.

It is true also that if we can recognize God in Christ crucified, or, to use current terms, if we can recognize in him the clear manifestation of the very ground of our being, there is release from our recognized guilt if we will be just humble enough to accept it instead of torturing ourselves with the hopeless task of trying to earn such forgiveness. It can be enough to know that the best thought it well worthwhile to die for the worst in full knowledge of what the worst was; it includes me, whatever I may be. It may indeed be seen, as Jesus plainly implied in his teaching, that there never was any problem here from God's side. This forgiveness, reconciliation, has always been freely available. It was never a matter of getting him to give it, but only of getting those who needed it to receive it. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (*II Corinthians* 5: 19), not, as so many misguided theologians and not a few hymn writers would have us believe, reconciling himself to the world.

Nevertheless, it is time it was recognized that this aspect was not the be-all and end-all of why Jesus gave his life, however important to particular people at particular times. Nor is it the mark of saintliness he would admire to gloom continually over introspective discoveries of ever more delicate refinements of one's own sinfulness. This is not humility; it is inverted pride, encouraged, alas, by so much of traditional church liturgy. Jesus accepted the cross, with all its degradation, humiliation and anguish, for something infinitely positive. He died because he had come to believe that this was the only way to inaugurate the kingdom of God, its coming with power. This was a new type of life; not mere banishment of guilt, though negatively it included this. It was a life of dazzling possi-

bilities, of freedom in action and freedom from worry; it was a life to break man's crippling sense of failure and destroy his frustrations; it offered a new sense of importance and zest in all he did; it released new springs of compassion and warm desire to serve. It was in fact the real completely natural life, because it was united in conscious harmony with the personal, universal purpose underlying all things. And once it really broke out it could not remain the partial possession of a few; it would sweep forward, feeding its own momentum, to a transformation of all human society with a speed that would mark that generation forever.

We may as well ask here, as must be asked sooner or later, whether or not Jesus was a noble but misguided and deluded fanatic. We are bound to recognize that, according to the most reliable account, he died in despair at the last, feeling God-forsaken, and probably of a broken heart, since six hours was no length of time for a man to survive on the cross. In this he tasted the last dregs of human suffering, and made himself kin with every poor despairing soul who has ever been. But why thus? What had he expected to happen in his dying hours that did not happen? There is natural reticence to probe; but we are bound to try to understand, if only because he would ever have it so.

Thoroughgoing eschatologists, like Schweitzer, would have us believe that Jesus looked to his dying to force dramatic miraculous divine intervention from the skies, and that he expected to see it before death overtook him, angelic legions establishing the Kingdom and carrying him as 'Son of Man' before the Ancient of Days in triumph. It is a plausible theory, true to the thought of some apocalyptic writers of that time. But it can be held only by ignoring the major part and the most profound of Jesus' own teaching. It is much more likely—and true to all else said here in interpreting his actions by his teaching—that Jesus felt his dying eyes would surely see among

the bystanders some beginnings of the breaking of the barriers in men's hard hearts, some sign there among the thousands of flocking Passover pilgrims, who could not but remember that he was being slain even at the same time as the Passover lambs were being slain for them, that their hearts were being turned in true repentance to God to open in themselves the floodgates of the Kingdom. But scoffing and indifference was all he saw from the cross, to draw from him finally the terrible cry, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' (*Mark* 15: 34).

This is the terrible moment of human history, the moment of truth. It is symbolized by the evangelists in that they surround it with darkness, eclipse and earthquake. Was Jesus fundamentally mistaken? In answering this, we answer every other question about life's meaning that demands an answer. And answer it we must, if we are ever to know what we are about.

The synoptic writers give their answer, even before they turn to the sequel of Good Friday, in yet another symbol attached to the moment of Christ's death: 'And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom' (*Mark* 15: 38). This curtain hid the Holy of Holies, wherein men said God dwelt. In the death of Jesus, the heart of the Eternal had been bared before men.

7 Easter

In this great festival we come to the real centre of the Christian year. In considering the events which preceded it we have seen that today especially it is necessary to preserve a certain objectivity of approach in order to discover the nature of their factual basis. But the moment we proceeded from facts to their ultimate meaning, which alone gives basis for celebration, in some measure at least we were having to decide in advance our interpretation of Easter. And in setting forth a Christian valuation of events in the life of Jesus including his death, I was anticipating a similar valuation of that which we are now to consider. Since all centres here finally, it would be a great convenience if we could commence the Christian year with Easter. And yet we cannot, since it has no real meaning unless considered in the light of all that Jesus was and did previous to this occasion. Yet even here it is necessary also to begin by trying to discover as objectively as possible what exactly happened at that first Easter. Only by such an approach can we hope to discover vital meaning in it for our own generation.

We begin with what every reasonable historian, however sceptical, regards as unassailable. Within a few weeks of the crucifixion, those cowed disciples of Jesus who had fled at the death of their leader reappeared in Jerusalem and publicly maintained, with a courage that could not be silenced, that he was alive again, and in the interval had manifested himself to them. 'God raised him up,' they said, 'having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it' (*Acts* 2: 24). And this testimony has been the basis of the Christian faith ever since.

But when we try to penetrate further into the facts, we face what seems to be the utter confusion of the New Testament accounts of the resurrection. To name only a few points, the original end of Mark's gospel has been lost, but the rest of it is obviously leading to an account of resurrection appearances in Galilee; Matthew follows Mark on the latter point, but Luke places all the appearances in the region of Jerusalem; the fourth gospel places them in both Jerusalem and Galilee, but differs from the others as to who saw Jesus and where and when; and just to make things more difficult, Paul, in *1 Corinthians* 15, writing at least ten years before the earliest gospel and while some of the original witnesses were still alive, gives the then traditional account which had been handed on to him with a series of appearances in many respects quite different from any of the gospel accounts, and without any reference to place or to the story of the empty tomb.

What are we to make of all this? An obvious reaction would be to treat the whole thing as fabrication, but it would not be a profound one. Fabrication is to be suspected when various accounts agree exactly in detail, but not when they differ widely. A truly historical approach concentrates on what the stories, with all their differences, are agreed upon; namely that Jesus 'presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God' (*Acts* 1: 3). And it is perfectly reasonable to allow that many of Jesus' followers did at this time and in many different places undergo experiences which they interpreted thus, and which indeed subsequently transformed their lives. But no man is merely a historian; if we have any real understanding of what led up to the death of Jesus, and if we have any true desire to discover the meaning of human life, we are bound to go on and ask if the judgment of these disciples was essentially true. Had Jesus in any vital sense conquered evil and death? Had he in reality

succeeded most where he most seemed to fail? If so, here are springs of hope for humanity, the power of goodness demonstrated supreme as never before, the ultimate answer to all our deepest questionings. But if not, we do not remain as we were, suspended in doubt; rather has the life and death of Jesus then inadvertently compelled the honest man to recognize that life is ultimately meaningless. Either way, living as he did, the crucified has made himself the final test case.

In making a decision, however, we are bound to seek to relate the resurrection (if such it be) to life as a whole as it is experienced. And as with Christmas, the usual church celebrations and preachings of Easter conspire to prevent this by insisting that it must be accepted as a miraculous event of special divine intervention in the normal processes of life and death. It needs to be said plainly that mankind is now reaching a stage of development in which belief in such miracles has become a positive hindrance to real religion. We need not talk here about science and miracles, for there are fatal religious objections to the whole idea of 'special divine interventions'. These are, first, that special miracles in the past (even if they happened) can have no relevance to life in our age when we do not expect them to happen, and second, if God helpfully intervenes on a certain few occasions (usually past) it means he is not being as helpful as he might be on all other occasions (usually present). In other words, belief in 'special divine interventions' has the practical effect of calling in question the moral character of Deity. It is a fact, whether recognized or not, that by regarding the incarnation and the resurrection as such special interventions the churches are ensuring a growing indifference to the meaning of such events, even where they are accepted as true.

The New Testament, of course, written in pre-scientific days, seems to lend credence to this idea of special interventions. Yet at a deeper level it does not. The stress in

the teaching of Jesus is always on God fulfilling himself through the normal processes of life and history. As the fourth gospel admirably summarizes him, 'My Father is working still, and I am working. . . . The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father *doing*' (*John* 5: 17, 19). Moreover, at its most profound, the apostolic witness to the resurrection is concerned to emphasize its essential relation to the norm. Hence Peter, as in the text already quoted: 'God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was *not possible* for him to be held by it' (*Acts* 2: 24). And Paul, relating the particular to the general: 'We testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised' (*1 Corinthians* 15: 15—and over and over again in the same passage). Paul's witness is of especial importance, considering that his is the earliest written account we possess. Not only does he make no reference to the empty tomb, as already indicated, but he also claims his own undoubtedly visionary experience (not shared by the bystanders) on the Damascus road as a resurrection appearance taking place quite a time after Pentecost: 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me' (*1 Corinthians* 15: 8).

From a proper sifting of all this evidence therefore it is eminently reasonable to suppose that the discovery by the women of *an* empty tomb on the first day of the week originally played no real part in the Easter faith. It achieved its prominence only years later when, in defence against scoffers, the passage of time encouraged Christians of the second generation to develop materialistic conceptions of the resurrection of Christ. But the origin of the church's faith would seem to have been in numbers of experiences, some visionary and some possibly not, frequently independent of each other, amongst the widely scattered followers of Jesus, some in the region of Jerusalem and some in Galilee. The meaning of these experiences for them all was to the effect (reinforced by half

remembered words of Jesus that his dying would inaugurate the Kingdom) that his death, far from being defeat, had actually opened the door to victory—or, as they put it, 'He is risen!' The thought of the Kingdom's speedy coming with power which had dominated him still dominated them, as may be seen from their words in one of the reported experiences: 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' (*Acts* 1: 6). It must not be forgotten that the early resurrection and ascension faith of the church carried with it as inevitable corollary that, within foreseeable time, the Kingdom would come and Christ in some real sense return with it. And yet also from the beginning the experiences included an assurance that even then he was already victorious.

It comes to this finally: we have a decision to make which by its nature must turn out to be the most profound of our lives, and we must make it with the whole of what we are. Does the Easter experience represent the truth? Was Jesus thus fundamentally right in what he believed, taught and lived and for which he died? If we would answer 'Yes' we can find support in the subsequent spreading of Christianity, but we cannot find excuse from making this personal judgment of faith by leaning upon the supposed 'proof' of interventionist miracle—if only because such 'miracles' do not indeed prove what they are supposed to prove.

But if we will so answer 'Yes', countless witnesses down the ages from the first disciples onwards will give their testimony, to which I add my own, that it is a judgment thereafter proven to them in their experience of living. We find that life does respond to us as we live for him, with him and by him who died for all. There is the present reward of a sense of absolute worthwhileness even in our sufferings for the kingdom of God's sake. Every cross finds its resurrection. Defenceless, we are defended. When we dare to adventure for the right we are not left finally desolate among enemies; there is a providence that works

through the communion of the saints on earth, though often they are not orthodox 'saints' and would shudder at the ascription. We find ourselves 'at home' in the world even in the midst of our struggles, knowing that society could exist without hatred, ugliness and lies, but cannot hold together at all without goodness, beauty and truth. All human history begins to make sense. We are conscious of having discovered life's main line and the power to follow it; yet we are conscious too that we have discovered it only because it has been revealed, and the power we possess is not our own. We are free, because we know ourselves dependent. We are sanguine because, having found the springs of real social progress, we know we are useful.

Life is seen to be personal. And born of the experience of living its fullness comes the conviction that death is not the end but a new beginning, not indeed a ghostly immortality nor a raising of dead bodies from graves at the end of time, but a 'resurrection life' like that of Christ implied in the Easter experience, a life in which nothing is lost of all that was worthwhile here, but all is transformed to a fuller flowering, heaven to those who love life as it must be hell to those who hate it and fly from it. Paul works out the conditions of this fuller life from his own religious intuitions in the latter part of *1 Corinthians* 15, a 'spiritual body', freed from the limitations of our present physical bodies and yet the recognizable organism of the same personality. And he has the wit to perceive that this involves a 'resurrected' world in which that new life can be lived: 'The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (*Romans* 8: 21). The late J W Dunne, exponent of the famous time-theory and one of the few daring scientific philosophers of our time, reached a view virtually identical with that of Paul though starting from a quite different standpoint, though nobody seems to have noticed the connection. Perhaps the day is not far distant, however, when we shall no longer have to rely on religious intuitions alone for the certainty of a future life which is absolutely worthwhile taking into account.

But if life is personal, it also involves fellowship if it is to be full here and hereafter. This is the ultimate justification for the church and the necessity of belonging to it in some vital sense. We cannot do without each other—we cannot grow without each other. The point is beautifully made in what seems to underlie the most perfect (from the literary point of view) of the resurrection narratives, the Walk to Emmaus. In origin it may well have been a resurrection experience without a vision, two despairing disciples trying to find meaning in the death of their master. What neither could discover alone, they find through their heart-searching and mind-searching together, an inspiration of hope-filled understanding that his cross so borne means not defeat but victory, and is indeed implied in scriptures they have loved but whose meaning they had never grasped. At supper, their hearts still burning within them, their understanding is further increased. As they break bread they cannot but remember the many such times when Jesus broke it for them. And in a sudden flash they know he is indeed there, breaking it again with them. The revelation that so unexpectedly came to them as they communed on the road was because, all unseen, unknown, a third had walked with them. 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (*Matthew* 18: 20).

The resurrection experiences of the first disciples illumine but ought not to enslave us. We are not at the mercy of records of the past, blindly to be accepted with no possible correspondence to our present. The resurrection faith can be ours because we too have known the resurrection experience. We have not usually to press far along the road of Christian fellowship, one seeker sharing with others, before light begins to break that comes from none of us. Perhaps we have already known this without realiz-

ing its meaning to the full. 'Perchance we have not always wist Who has been with us by the way.' It is a light that streams from the face of our Risen Lord.

8 Ascension

This festival is always celebrated on a Thursday, the fortieth day from Easter, because the opening of the *Acts of the Apostles* records that the resurrection appearances covered a period of forty days and the ascension marks the end of them. As an event, it bears all the marks of being mythological in origin. This ought to be more freely recognized today than it usually is in Christian circles, thus opening the door to a true and full appreciation of its valuable meaning.

Reference to the occasion, though without any description of it, is made in the fourth gospel. Luke alone describes it, in two different treatments: a brief one at the end of his gospel, and a fuller one in the *Acts*. He is the most materialistic of all the New Testament writers in his description of Christ's resurrection body, declaring that in one of his appearances he ate solid food. It follows, therefore, that to accept his account of the ascension as literal historical event implies the old-time three-storey view of the universe that heaven is 'up'. No serious-minded person today, of course, can be expected to tolerate such an idea for a moment.

But, as we have seen in dealing with other mythological elements in the gospels, these descriptions were perfectly legitimate as a method of expressing the meaning of events within the framework of the times in which they were written. It is always worthwhile therefore to ask why they came to be believed and hence written down, lest in throwing them out we discard some valuable truth of the Gospel we cannot afford to lose.

The story of the ascension, whether or not based on details of an actual vision, was required in the circum-

stances of the early church to explain a fact—that a time came when the resurrection appearances ceased, and also as a judgment on that fact—that it was right and proper that this should be so. True, the appearances probably did not end as abruptly as suggested; we know that Paul claimed that the Risen Master appeared to him long after the alleged date of the ascension with effects on his subsequent career which make his vision as valid as that of any other of the disciples. But this is no reflection on the underlying wisdom of the church which produced the ascension story when Paul's experience had, like that of others, become a matter of history. Her intuitive perceptions here have cogency still. They refer to truths of the Gospel which, if we do not remember them on Ascension Day, we are in danger of forgetting altogether.

The most remarkable point in the accounts is the reference to the reaction of the disciples when their master was parted from them: 'They returned to Jerusalem with great joy' (*Luke* 24: 52). We may well ask why, when we think, say, of Elisha's grief when Elijah was so parted from him. The immediate answer is the realization by those who loved him that the earthly pilgrimage of Jesus was now fully completed; he had entered into his eternal glory. While we may, and indeed ought to hold that virtue can be its own reward, in the greater world where all life is enhanced so must be this reward, if only in a fuller field for the expression of the virtue. The early Christians were aware of this because even they themselves on earth were within its scope. His beneficent influence upon them was not of mere memory, for indeed most of them had no personal memories of him. Nor was it only the moving power of his great story. They were conscious rather of his living presence with them and within them. And if even earth could catch such reflections, how great the range of his personality in the heavenly places to which he was gone—matter for rejoicing indeed.

Secondly, since in every sense Jesus was now completely one with God, they need not fear to worship him. Certain ancient manuscripts of the passage quoted in the previous paragraph insert that the disciples did so immediately. This practice has always been a bone of contention where opposition to the faith has been concerned. Man, we are told, is never fit subject for worship—only God. Orthodox Christians (so-called) have often unfortunately accepted the implied absolute division between human and divine, answering their opponents by thrusting Jesus so far to the godward side of this theoretical and arbitrary division that they have unwittingly made unreal the very humanity on which his divine appeal depends. These who maintain that Jesus in his earthly life 'was God' in a sense which he himself never claimed are left with an impersonal clockwork Christ on their hands; they are the real destroyers of the incarnation as meaningful, for a divinity which by its nature cannot be shared is unknowable and for practical purposes useless to men.

But it is the very merit of the ascension story that, contrary to superficial assumption, it is not 'up in the air'. Treated properly, and therefore as mythology, its teaching is in fact very 'down to earth'. These early disciples, without a creed to guide them, worshipped their master when he was gone from them, and did so for a very practical reason. He himself, who had declared, 'You will know them by their fruits' (*Matthew* 7: 16), had taught them to be practical. They worshipped him because doing so brought them near to God as never before. They did so instinctively because in truth they were humble men of a humility we would at all times do well to share. In short, they recognized their own humanity, that they could only worship God in human terms, as indeed we can only think, feel and will anything in human terms. And what more appropriate terms than those of Jesus who had taught and shown what God is like? Assuming we mean it, to say 'Thou art good' is still to worship God in human terms.

But to say (still assuming we mean it) 'Thou hast died for me' is to worship with more reality and therefore with greater effect; the abstraction becomes concrete.

In worshipping Jesus, therefore, they found that God was a stranger no longer, nor less honoured because this was so. And, like these our brothers of long ago, we similarly may find him in our changed but still human background. So the world of more than private emotions, all about us that was dark and meaningless, becomes in Christ alive with eternal purpose in which we are joyfully permitted to share.

Indeed, the final great cause for ascension rejoicing was that henceforth everyday life was to be the substance of religion. The elation of the resurrection experiences had been largely tied up with mysterious visions, unusual events; it would have crippled the true effectiveness of the faith for ordinary people if it had continued to be tied up with what we might call 'seeing things'.

Great religious awakenings as well as lesser ones undeniably often start like this. The beginning of Jesus' own ministry had been accompanied by the shrieks of the 'demon-possessed', just as Wesley's early open-air preaching was marked by numbers of hearers falling down in fits. But these things are ever incidentals; danger arises when they are treated as of such importance that attempts are made to perpetuate them, for then the real meaning of the faith becomes obscured. Certain factions of the early church as well as some sects down to the present day have fallen into this pit over the matter of 'speaking with tongues' or uttering ecstatic gibberish, seeking to make this the essential mark of conversion or possession by the spirit of God.

But the early Christians as a whole resisted the temptation to perpetuate visionary experiences of the Risen Christ as the continuous hall-mark of faith. For one thing, they soon had a better mark, to be considered in the next chapter: the gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled them

indeed to say, concerning belief on the basis of resurrection appearances, 'Blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet believe' (*John* 20: 29). For another, they were thus being true to what may well be described as the earthiness of their master's teaching of the kingdom of God. The most striking expression of the latter had been in his parables. These, so frequently and badly misunderstood as detailed allegories, were actually expressions of real life as known to all his hearers. They gave no cut-and-dried answers to men's questions. Artistically presented stories and incidents, they were intended as challenge to perceive the perpetual action of God revealed in them. The shepherd who scoured the hills for his lost sheep was a real shepherd; the pearl-merchant ready to trust his judgment of a good bargain to the extent of selling all to gain it was a real pearl-merchant, and in this 'realness' the daily action of God could be seen, revealing the character of him with whom we have to do. He even revealed himself in an unscrupulous steward having the wit and will as crisis loomed upon him to gain himself necessary friends while yet there was time. The detail of these parables is so acutely observed that today they are regarded as important sources for the study of the social history of the first century Roman Empire. But they were designed by their author to reveal 'the sons of the Kingdom', the men who could understand God's actions here set forth and who could therefore equally see what he was doing in the everyday world in which they lived. God, for Jesus, was no distant external being sending occasional messages from afar via exceptional persons of peculiar genius; rather did he reveal himself with power and purpose close at hand in life, to be seen by all who were 'pure in heart' (*Matthew* 5: 8).

To all this, the ascension story brings us back. Like those followers returning with great joy to Jerusalem to await an even fuller commissioning, so we who would be accounted belonging to the Risen and Ascended Lord are sent to be

active and 'at home' in the everyday world, knowing the great secret that, in spite of all superficial appearances, it is God's world. And as with them so with us: it is there we shall find his greatest gift.

9 Whitsun

The Jewish Passover is followed by the Feast of Weeks fifty days later—hence the Greek name given to the latter, Pentecost. It was a first-fruits harvest festival, and one of the three annual celebrations which devout Jews were expected to attend at Jerusalem. This, therefore, was the first convenient occasion on which the scattered followers of Jesus could get together after his death. And here no doubt, comparing notes, they all realized for the first time and with mounting excitement how widespread among them in the interval had been the experience of assurance that his seeming final defeat was really his eternal victory.

The culmination came on the day of Pentecost itself when about a hundred and twenty disciples were met in one place—a tremendous burst of inspiration of lasting effect which, in recollection, they could only describe in poetic terms of rushing wind and tongues of fire and interpret as the gift of Holy Spirit. It issued in an immediate sense of missionary zeal; they rushed out to tell the pilgrim crowds what it all meant. The story that all their hearers understood as if addressed in their native tongues may have sprung from the disciples speaking better Greek, of which everybody had some understanding, than could normally be expected. Parallel cases have been known: but whatever the explanation, the day reached its crisis in a mighty speech by Peter clearly setting forth the issues from Christ's death and resurrection which carried conviction with great numbers of the Jews who heard him.

Even if the figure of three thousand added that day to the disciples represents an exaggeration, it still must be accepted as a success worthy of celebration as the real

birthday of the church. More important than numbers was the quality of life they soon began to show under the dominance of the same Holy Spirit. They were so knit together in one fellowship that, apparently quite spontaneously, they took to the spirit of the Feeding of the Five Thousand by practising a voluntary communism of their goods. 'And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need' (*Acts* 2: 44–45). When all due allowance is made for the facts that they were assuming the time to be very short before the final consummation of all things, and that their practices were unsystematic (a community of goods and not of labour and earnings), it remains nevertheless a very remarkable piece of unprompted social action. They had evidently touched the springs of true human living in a unique way, and the least we can do is to seek to analyse what had come to them.

'The gift of the Holy Spirit' (*Acts* 2: 38) is a phrase to be understood in the light of the history behind it. Going backwards by stages, the first thing to be said about it is that the Holy Spirit was the spirit of Jesus Christ. As Paul puts it, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit' (*11 Corinthians* 3: 17). The important point here is that the character of the Spirit is the character of Jesus, no longer acting upon them, as in his lifetime through the medium of their senses, but directly upon the inner man. This was an advantage which accrued to the disciples by the fact that their master was no longer with them in the flesh; his attention to each of them was no longer conditioned by matters of space and time which limit every human person on earth. As the fourth gospel puts it into the mouth of Jesus himself, 'It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (*John* 16: 7). It is not thus a different experience from that given in the resurrection visions but rather an intensification of the same. The

latter had been mainly personal in effect; this was social, with a definite relation to the discovery on meeting in Jerusalem that so many of them, previously and in apparent independence, had received the resurrection faith. And the proof that this was the spirit of Jesus which now animated them was to be seen in the fruits, personal and social. Paul is really attempting to describe the character of Jesus when he declares, 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (*Galatians* 5: 22–23).

To go back a step further, the second thing to be said of the Holy Spirit as the disciples thought of him is that this was the power which had guided, inspired and enabled the long line of great leaders and prophets who had directed Israel along the chosen providential path whereby it should come to pass that by her 'all the families of the earth will bless themselves' (*Genesis* 12: 3). Jesus had associated himself with this line as its fulfilment when, in his first sermon, at Nazareth, he had preached on a text from Trito-Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor' (*Luke* 4: 18 and *Isaiah* 61: 1). In other words, the disciples were claiming to be animated by the Spirit not only of personal and social self-realization but also of the guiding principle of all human history. They were further declaring that what men had been able hitherto to observe only as acting fitfully through a few was now coming visibly and regularly to the many, as indeed the prophets had foretold would be so. Peter's pentecostal address to the multitudes declared, concerning what had happened: 'This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" ' (*Acts* 2: 16–17 and *Joel* 2: 28).

And, to move back to the third and final stage of Jewish-Christian thought, the character of the Holy Spirit manifested in the meaning of human relationships and history was also the principle active in the creation

and sustaining of the entire universe. At the very beginning, 'the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters' (*Genesis* 1 : 2), bringing order out of chaos. And he continued to do so: 'When thou sendest forth thy Spirit, they are created; and thou renewest the face of the ground' (*Psalm* 104: 30).

The experience and claim of the disciples on Whit Sunday therefore amounted to this, in effect: it had been given to them to enter upon a new plane of living; they had received a quality of conscious being, directed yet free, whereby they were at one with living Universal Purpose who himself was one in the character of all his manifestations in creation, history and answering deepest human need; Holy Spirit, Jesus, God—the terms for practical purposes had become interchangeable, as had the life of the Spirit, the personality of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

All that need now be asked here are the questions of whether this new life in the Spirit does in fact correspond to reality and if so how it may be obtained. Regarding the former, we are bound to say that certainty of the mathematical type of proof either way is out of the question: only omniscience could know and take into account all the factors involved. All that can be done is to assess probabilities as far as our knowledge can take us, recognizing the subjective element necessarily involved, choosing to live by the likelier possibility, and so looking for the kind of assurance that can come from experience, confirming or denying the original judgment. The Christian who knows what he is doing chooses to believe, for purposes of living, that the cosmos is indeed a universe (basically one), and meaningful in a sense in which we can share. The primary factors influencing him today to accept the apostolic conclusion will probably be that, in relation to creation, apparently blind natural forces have shown their upward trend in arriving at the evolution of man, that desirable progress in history has taken place emanating mainly from

the influence of men of great moral and spiritual stature (supremely from Jesus himself), and that life lived in the spirit of the same Jesus does seem to bring within the individual that sense of dynamic contentment and zestful ease of heart which man forever strives to attain. And the general consensus of those who have lived on this basis is that here they have touched reality; here they have been found of God.

As to how this life of the Spirit may be obtained, it is true that, 'The wind blows where it wills' (*John* 3: 8). He is not one to be manipulated; none ever receives who seeks to claim him by right; he comes only to the humble of heart who acknowledge their absolute dependence, that his coming is always a pure gift they can never hope to earn, and that it is not theirs to question even the time of his appearing to them. Nevertheless, it is also true that the Holy Spirit does not work in a vacuum. We can prepare for his coming by practical recognition that he costs us all we have and are, and that there can be for us no private reservation of a few other props if we are to receive him when he comes.

Prepare for his coming? The wheel has turned full circle. This is where we began in Advent. But it is a mounting circle.

10 Trinity

Trinity Sunday is unique among the great festivals of the Christian church in that it is not attached to some event or supposed event in the life of Jesus or its immediate sequel. Yet it comes very properly a week after the last of those celebrated events, Whit Sunday, for it is the summarizing festival. For half the year we remember individual aspects of the revelation through Jesus Christ, but at Trinity we celebrate the meaning of the whole. Then begins the long procession of the Sundays after Trinity lasting the rest of the Christian year; they are not too many in which to consider the implications of the whole.

There may be those, however, who object that on Trinity Sunday we do not celebrate the whole, but merely the Christian doctrine of God. That 'merely' gives them away, just as many preachers give themselves away by avoiding preaching on the Holy Trinity and leaving the field to narrow dogmatists. The custom of making this the special day for considering the call to the ministry has no doubt been strengthened in recent years by the reluctance of many to expound the major theological theme which is assumed to be too technical and lacking in interest for the lay mind. Theirs not to reason why but simply to accept, even if but nominally and somewhat uneasily; truth to tell, many preachers feel that goes for them too.

It is, however, a false practicality which feels it can dispense with serious exposition of high doctrine. Only if we regard our knowledge of God as a revelation passively to be accepted, from a sphere totally different from that in which we live, can we think of making a pragmatic separation of human affairs from divine. It will be ob-

vious, however, that such an approach is the reverse of that which has been followed here in consideration of the Christian year. The procedure has been such that in seeking the revelation of God in the normal processes of living we have been establishing that the doctrine of God is indeed concerned with the whole; it implies and includes the doctrine of man.

What then can we say of belief in the Holy Trinity? Like the doctrine of the Person of Christ which was earlier defined, it was formulated against an unquestioned background of debased Greek philosophical thought which we can no longer so accept. Yet it was an attempt to systematize the New Testament experience of God, and as such commands our respect. The familiar words of the benediction testify to this: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (*II Corinthians* 13: 14).

It cannot be regarded as an enclosing definition of God, for he is by his nature beyond such defining in human terms. As soon expect a dog, who indeed (and with cause) loves and trusts his master, to define his master adequately. It is an attempted description of as much of God as the Christian can know of him, not of what God is to himself, which we can never know. Any suggestion therefore that the doctrine means that God is ultimately in himself tripartite in nature is blasphemous presumption. If we have known God in three personal manifestations, it is not to say that he may not have a million possible personal manifestations as yet unknown to us and then a million more.

Yet, regarded as a symbol, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity expresses final reality with a richness of content unlikely to be surpassed. It sets forth at one and the same time both what we know and what we cannot know. To those who live with him on the basis of total commitment, God reveals himself as the trustworthy Father in creation and providence; he speaks in history supremely in the

person of the Son; he manifests himself as indwelling love and power in the presence of the Holy Spirit. One-sidedness in living can only be avoided by equal practical emphasis on each of the three. It can be observed that many who stress only the fatherhood of God tend to be great on social reform but lose the personal touch; others, hoping to escape theology, stress Jesus as teacher, beginning by trying to copy his example and ending by regretfully dismissing him as impracticable; still others, their stress on the Holy Spirit, tend to that mystic contemplation which shuts itself off from worldly concerns. But the full-orbed life involves the full-orbed faith. Only in its completeness is the tension of opposites resolved, as they were resolved in Jesus.

Yet by resolutely refusing tri-theism and insisting that the Three are eternally One, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity points beyond what Christian experience knows to the mystery of divine infinity. By equally refusing reduction of three personal manifestations to mere aspects, and insisting also that the One is eternally Three, it symbolically points to an infinity which, though uncomprehended, is not fearsomely blank and empty to us but warm and trustworthy. The God who contains Persons within his Oneness is above personality as we know it, but above, not below—the true opposite of impersonal. In so far as we are enabled to glimpse him, he is able to sustain us. Where our wills are lost in his there is peace in the midst of striving, strength made perfect in weakness, exaltation in humility and the love which casts out fear and conquers hatred. Truly, we express the inexpressible when with understanding we cry:

> Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! . . .
> God in Three Persons, blessèd Trinity!

11 Truth to Tell

The last sermon, preached at York Road Methodist Church, West Hartlepool, on 21 June 1964

Acts 24: 14 (AV): 'After the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers.'

These words are part of Paul's defence before Felix the governor. The apostle was answering the charges laid against him by the Jewish authorities.

This text also reflects my own position today, as I preach to you for possibly the last time. It further indicates the things I have to say upon so serious an occasion.

You all now know that two years ago I was officially convicted of 'heresy', and by accepting the logical consequences of that verdict, I find myself as a result under threat of expulsion from the Methodist ministry at the end of this month. I do not intend to go into the details again. Instead, I want us to examine some of the deeper issues involved in this situation. Let us look, therefore, at three points in the text: 'the way', 'heresy', and 'worship'. We begin by asking:

WHAT IS 'THE WAY'?

In the earliest days of the church, its members did not call themselves 'Christians'. The name 'Christian' was given to them by pagans as a nickname—a nickname which eventually stuck.

The followers of Jesus spoke of their faith as 'the way', and of themselves as 'those of the way'. In other words, they did not think of themselves as bound together by a set of notions or a collection of theological opinions. Rather, they felt themselves joined together by a common way of living. It was a way of life centred upon Jesus Christ. For he, they maintained, though dead, yet lived!

His spirit lived among them and within them, and sought to live in all men. To live under his command and possessed by his spirit—this was the only way really to live. And this was what they meant when they spoke of themselves as followers of 'the way'. Paul too, who at first persecuted those of 'the way', after his conversion could say (as he does in our text): 'After *the way* . . ., so worship I . . . God.'

And one thing often forgotten by present-day Methodists is that they originate in a quite deliberate attempt (under the leadership of John Wesley) to get back to this old practical simplicity of 'the way'. As Wesley himself wrote: 'I, and all who follow my judgment, do vehemently refuse to be distinguished from other men, by any but the common principles of Christianity—the plain, old Christianity that I teach, renouncing and detesting all other marks of distinction.'

In other words, Methodism was not a sect. (The very name 'Methodist' was yet another nickname, given to this people by others. Wesley's original name for them was simply 'the United Societies'.) And, not being a sect, they could not think of union with other sects or denominations —because they did not regard themselves as divided from these others. To quote Wesley again: 'Whosoever is what I preach (let him be called what he will, for names change not the nature of things), he is a Christian, not in name only, but in heart and in life. . . . He so walks as Christ also walked.' In other words, we may add, such a one (call him 'Methodist', 'Christian', or what you will)—such a one is a follower of 'the way'.

Is it possible to describe this 'way' briefly? I think it is. John Macmurray once declared: 'The discovery which Jesus made was the discovery that human life is *personal*.' To be a follower of 'the way' is to live on the basis of that discovery. It means to live in humble practical dependence on him whose loving purpose pervades all life, a loving

purpose manifest supremely in the man Jesus. In trusting him, we know we are accepted just as we are. Hence we are set free from our guilt, fears and frustration. We are set free to live the life of love towards others. This is salvation; this is heaven; this is to be indeed 'the salt of the earth', through whom the kingdom of God comes.

Original Christianity and original Methodism, then, is a way of living and not a set of notions. And we now have to see what light this throws on our second question:

WHAT IS 'HERESY'?

A preacher, at morning service, once gave a very learned discourse. An old lady afterwards commented: 'Oh, what a wonderful sermon!' 'But did you understand it?' somebody asked. 'Oh, no,' she replied, 'I wouldn't *presume* to understand it.'

Now if the object of preaching is to air learned opinions, then a bad sermon is one that is not scholarly. But if the object of preaching is to offer men the new life in Christ, then a bad sermon is one that offers something else instead of that new life.

Similarly, if the Christian faith is a collection of beliefs, then heresy is mistaken belief. But if the Christian faith is 'the way' of living, then real heresy can only be a mistaken way of living.

John Wesley showed how well he knew that real heresy is a wrong way of living. In his Sermon *On Schism* he declared: 'This word [heresy], therefore, which has been so strangely distorted for many centuries, as if it meant erroneous opinions . . . has not the least reference to opinions, whether right or wrong.'

And again, in his pamphlet *The Character of a Methodist* (from which I have previously quoted), he roundly declares: 'The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort. . . . What then is the mark? . . . I answer: a Methodist is one who has "the love of God shed

abroad in his heart" . . . and . . . loves his neighbour as himself.'

Now I, as you know, have been found guilty of heresy on a point of interpretation of the Deity of Christ. And because I will not pretend to have altered my so-called erroneous opinions, it has been proposed to put me out of the Methodist ministry. If this recommendation is carried through, therefore, it will mean that Methodism has changed its fundamental character. It will mean that it no longer is Methodism as the liberal-minded John Wesley knew it. We may well pray, indeed, that this disaster may be averted—and not for my sake (I am unimportant), but for Methodism's sake, and for the sake of her witness to the world.

None of this, however, means that opinions and interpretations are unimportant. They are important, but in a secondary way. How this is to be understood will be seen as we look at our final point:

WHAT IS 'WORSHIP'?

'After the way which they call heresy,' said Paul, 'so worship I the God of my fathers.' Note that he worshipped the God of his fathers—but not in their way. They had trodden the steps of Moses, but Paul had walked in the footsteps of Jesus. Hence he understood their God more perfectly than they did. God indeed never changes; it is only our understanding of him that changes.

A boy was once lost in a fog. He saw a shape approaching him. At first he thought it was a monster, and he was terrified. Then he saw it was a man, and he was relieved. Finally he saw it was his father, and he was overjoyed, and ran to him.

Here we have the due importance of right opinions or ideas. Wrong ideas of God frighten us from him. Less wrong ideas leave us indifferent. Right ideas show us who he is and what he is doing. *But we have still to run to him.*

Right or wrong ideas, we only truly worship him when our lives are knit with his, when our wills are lost in God's, when in his strength we go where he goes and do as he does. *This* is the way of life, supremely revealed in Jesus who is himself the way.

In conclusion, then, I claim the utmost freedom of interpretation. I claim it as a Christian and a Methodist. I claim it not because right ideas infallibly turn a man to God, but because wrong ideas prevent any real choice in the matter.

Today, especially, wrong ideas about God reduce him to a dim problematic figure, so that it never occurs to men to learn of his reality by observing what he is regularly doing in their workaday world.

Today, especially, wrong ideas about Jesus separate him from us in the name of a false reverence; men never listen to his dynamic word for our generation because we allow them to think, of all things, that they will be bored!

We have all of us, not just a few, to learn to think hard again, and have courage to speak out again. Each and every one, from the simplest to the wisest, has something special to contribute from his own special and unique background.

Yet, when all is said and done, our thinking can only open a door. We have still to fling ourselves through into the open arms of God; we have still to bend our knees at the foot of Christ's cross. The final word for us all is:

> Venture on him, venture wholly;
> Let no other trust intrude:
> None but Jesus
> Can do helpless sinners good.

Truth to Tell

Walter Gill, born in 1914, educated at City of Leeds School and Didsbury College, Manchester, was ordained for the Methodist ministry in 1944. Theological and social radical, he became known for struggles against various injustices, notably leading Dagenham housing applicants against what he regarded as oppression by the LCC. He also attracted attention by using secular films for religious purposes. A charge of heresy was brought against him in 1962 because he wrote 'The Word is made flesh as far as it can be in any baby, at the birth of every child'. He was officially reprimanded, and in 1964 he was expelled from the Methodist Church by the Methodist Conference. In this book he works his way through the Christian year, expressing in trenchant terms his own response to the orthodox attitude to Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and other events traditionally celebrated by the Christian Churches.

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