

life and dies there in the mountain of pride and by the waters of self-indulgence. Such as these Jeremy laments when he says, The noble sons of Sion and they that were clothed with the best gold, how are they esteemed as earthen vessels, the work of the potter's hands? (Lam. iv, 2.) The sons of holy Church, who at first were devoted to the contemplation of things to come, clothed with finest gold, adorned, that is, with spiritual wisdom, who first were golden vessels, vessels of wisdom, have become earthen vessels, of the clay of concupiscence. Formerly one could drink from them the wine of true delight; now the gall of asps and the bitter juice of labour. They are reckoned vessels of earth like the potter's handiwork; suddenly as brittle clay they are shattered, with a blow from the ancient enemy. Just so those who once fed delicately, who were once delighted with the fair sayings of the scriptures, have perished by the way, in the broad paths of worldly desires. Those who were fostered in rich array, that is in the fervour of charity, have grasped at the dung-hill, which is a love for the uncleanness of the flesh.

May God remove such disaster far from our brothers. Rather let attentive reading lead them on to devoted prayer.



### GAMALIEL

Q. Not a long time ago my children asked me the following question, which I ask you: 'Genesis i, 1-31 tells us about God's work of creation. But imagine that there is no earth, sun, stars, or moon. So before God's work of creation there existed only space. The question is: What was space before being space?'

PATERFAMILIAS, *Mexico.*

A. The question can be answered in one word; Nothing. It is the Christian faith that God created all things *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Is space nothing? Strictly speaking, no. The idea of space, like that of time, only has meaning in relation to material things. If there are no material things, earth, sun, stars, or moon, there is no space.

But the notion of 'nothing' is a very elusive one. Perhaps indeed you cannot really have a notion of nothing, but only a 'not-notion' of 'no-thing'. Certainly it is impossible to imagine 'nothing'. The nearest we can get to it is imagining 'space' or 'chaos' or 'emptiness'. And this is all that the writer of Genesis does. For we have to realize that the account of creation in Genesis is not a *scientific description*, nor a *philosophical exposition*, but an *imaginative dramatic picture*.

So before he begins to unfold God's work of creation, before the work of the first day, which means to say before time, the sacred writer gives what you could call an imaginative description of 'what space was before being space'. He says 'the earth was void and empty (*thohu wa-vohu* is the very expressive Hebrew phrase) and darkness was on the face of the deep'. Was this 'dark deep emptiness' created by God? He does not say so, but neither does he deny it. It was a question that he could neither ask nor answer in his 'picture language'.

Q. Can you explain the text 'Honour thy father and mother, that thou mayest live a long time, and it may be well with thee' (Exod. xx, 12; Deut. v, 16)? Is this promise personal to individuals, or applicable only to, say, a group or a people? Does the promise also have a material connotation?

FILIUS, *South Africa.*

A. Yes, the promise is of material blessings, and is personal to individuals. But we must beware of taking it out of its context, as if it were some timeless utterance of God, having the same reference to everybody everywhere at all times. The ten commandments do indeed express timeless universal moral principles; nonetheless the commandments, and this promise attached to the fourth, are contained in certain particular places in certain particular books; they were given to a certain people at a certain juncture of their history.

We only have to complete the sentence you quote to get some idea of the special context: '. . . that it may be well with thee in the land which the Lord thy God will give thee'. The promise made to the individual who honours his parents is thus intimately connected with the promise made to Israel of being given the promised land. So although it is made to individuals, it is made to

them in a social or group context as members of a society, more particularly as members of the chosen people. It is therefore bound up with the destiny of the chosen people, which in the old testament was a this-worldly destiny, to inherit the promised land, to be God's special people devoted to his worship, to await the coming of the Messiah. And so the promise is a this-worldly or material one of long and happy life in the ancestral homeland.

But we live in a day when the old testament has been fulfilled by the new. So old testament promises will not apply to us in quite the same simple this-worldly material sense. It will have this sense, but not only and not primarily this sense. St Paul quotes this commandment and promise in Ephesians vi, 2: 'Honour thy father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise'. This particular promise, like the commandment it is attached to, still holds, but now it is in the context of the Universal Promise Fulfilled, of the Promise of the Saviour Realized.

So to the objection that some people who honour their parents do not live long and happy lives, but die young and full of troubles, St Paul would possibly answer, 'We were promised these things *in the land which the Lord will give thee*. And that land, for us who have been baptized into the risen Christ, is no longer just Palestine or any other country; it is eternal life, the land of the resurrection, the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem to which our Lord has given us passports. In that land those who keep the commandments will infallibly enjoy the long life of eternity and the well-being of true bliss.'



### THE NEXT ISSUE

of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT will be a double number for August and September on the theme of 'Conversion'.