

CHRIST THE WORD

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IN an age of technical achievements and the mechanical repetition of words the unique Redemptive action of Christ THE WORD is particularly significant. Men are obliged in the exercise of free-will to choose Christ, who *is* the Word and brings the words of life, or Satan whose words are lies leading to death. Life eternal is the proper end of the whole man, but since the Fall he is open to temptation, and most of all to temptation through natural pride. Thus his especial tendency to pride is found in those activities which distinguish him from the other living creatures. His reason, a common object of idolatry, his humour—did not Bernard Shaw among other satirists take refuge from faith in a kind of pseudo-Godlike mockery?—his ability to use tools, whether useful or artistic or for pleasure, and above all his power to communicate the life of his soul through language, to other souls.

Language . . . words . . . the first overflow of the fullness of perfect Being in God is the Word: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him and without him was made nothing that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.' There is a further significance attached to the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity which is of special relevance: according to St Thomas, 'the words of Genesis "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" are expounded in a three-fold sense. . . . "In the beginning" is expounded "In the Son". For as the efficient principle is appropriated to the Father by reason of power, so the *exemplar principle* is appropriated to the Son by reason of wisdom, in order that, as it is said (Ps. 103, 24), "Thou hast made all things in wisdom", it may be understood that God made all things *in the beginning . . . that is in the Son.*' Thus according to this the Word is especially connected (i) with the creation of the universe, (ii) of man, (iii) of time, (iv) with the

exemplar principle, the whole conception of man in the image of God; and the Father and the Word have between them the Third Person, the Holy Spirit of Love.

Man is made in the image of God and he also has his *word*, or, one might say, his words and works; and in the case of men also—language is the chief and most glorious overflow of the abundant life he alone of earth's creatures possesses, the overflow of the life of his soul, the soul where sense and spirit meet and are united. Language is the inescapable witness to this unity between body and soul; the thought is spiritual, the words can be reduced to physical terms. Concepts expressed in abstract signs which convey them show the union of body and soul.

Our Lord himself emphasised the significance of language when he said 'Not that which goeth into a man defileth a man but that which cometh out of a man defileth a man'. The Church draws attention to the importance of words in the familiar prayer during the blessing of incense at Mass: (Ps. 140) 'Let my prayer, O Lord, be directed as incense in thy sight. . . . Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth, and a door round my lips: That my heart incline not to evil words to make excuses in sins.'

There is a sense in which a man's whole being, his personal self-hood is somehow committed in the words he speaks or writes. It is a well-established idea that 'a man's word is his bond'. From many points of view one can see plainly that a man's word comes nearer than anything else that is his to lifting him from the world of the finite and corruptible into that of the divine and immutable.

On earth the formal *Opus Dei*, or human-divine activity, is the regulated praise of God in words: it seems to be the nearest man on earth can get *actively* to his only real job, praising and loving God in heaven. Thus there seems to be after all more theological significance in the traditional picture of the Blessed in heaven playing harps and singing hymns round the throne of God, than it has become popular to think. One has only to imagine the Saints standing round passively while the praise came out of a wireless to get the full force of the idea! In the terms of this world to sing to God in 'words' is probably the highest way of praising

him. There is no space to discuss here the relative value of praise through other arts such as pure music, painting, etc.; hymns and the *Opus Dei* derive their special value from two facts: first that the words themselves came first from God, and secondly that words are more closely linked to the spiritual than the rest of creation, though that also came first from God. It must not be forgotten that God is to be glorified through Eternity by the praise of men, still creatures of body and spirit, but 'made new', and that this is the end of saving one's soul.

It has been suggested that because man is made in the image of God it is permissible to trace an analogy between Christ the Word, and the 'word' of man, understood firstly as physical signs of abstract and spiritual concepts, and more widely as including his works, all those activities which exist first according to some pattern in his mind and are then *incarnated*. (Some theories would include everything a man is or does in this category, and there is even some scientific ground for attributing physical diseases to spiritual evils inherited from the Fall, which would explain the words of our Lord to the man sick of the palsy.) It has also been suggested that in Eternity God will in some way be praised and glorified by the 'words' of glorified men, and that this activity can begin in this world; lastly, it was said that Satan attacks men through his pride in his highest activities—and this last idea may now be developed a little.

Apart from the effects of the active malice of the devil, man lives in a fallen and wounded state; his *natural tendency* is towards pride and self-worship, it is easier for him to be less than fully human than to keep to his proper end. In order to turn man from God the devil longs more than all to deflect his highest activities. Just as man's word—his vow—raises him towards a divine stability, so his word spoken flippantly, in bad faith, in deliberate ignorance, falsehood or self-deceit, lowers him not only towards the animals, but beneath them, for their voices were created to express only perfect physical experiences. Spoken and written words can betray the darkness of the soul they express: in a sense all speech of a serious kind (expressing more than mere physical sensation) is theological, as it expresses a state of

soul, a relationship between man and his maker. The relationship is often only implicit, but true words do express the spiritual life of a man and are therefore directly related to the one spiritual principle who created men from nothing: they show forth in a greater or lesser degree the *image* of God. They are the record of man acting in a very special sense *as man*: they can also be a most precious record of *God acting* on man, particularly in the 'inspired' writings of the Old Testament, and in the Gospels, of course, we have the human words of God made Man.

The recorded words of men during the course of history are a record of the lives of the souls of men; and if man, fallen from intercourse with his maker, and open to the tricks of malicious spiritual beings, had been left to himself the whole story would read as tragically as the most tragic parts already do. But the Word has always been here in the world to help him: 'Without him was made nothing that was made. . . . The light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it'; this was the 'light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world'.

The Word which created the universe was a Word of overflowing life and love—a Word equal to God. Just as man's words express or commit his whole self, so the Word of God both is God and expresses God, commits God: in the whole universe only the Word of God truly is. In the Old Dispensation the Word spoke through the beauty of creation, and through the Prophets of the Chosen People. Finally through the Blessed Virgin Mary human flesh itself is caught up into the divine life and the Spirit of Love overshadows an immaculate human woman and the Word is made flesh. We then see clearly just how far God through his Word has committed himself—as far as to *become man*. Through Christ the Way, the Word made flesh, man becomes a partaker in the divine life *through his flesh*.

When it is said that creation is the 'work of God's hands' it is surely a human analogy based on the truth that the creative works of men are their 'Word made flesh'; (taking 'flesh' in the sense of 'matter'). The creative activities of man are human activities properly so-called; they are activities of the soul. If they are indeed such they should be

directed explicitly towards the glory of God. The effect of the Fall and of the influence of the devil in man's activities is always recognisable by a greater or less deviation from this love and praise of the divine Creator or at least his handiwork. The work of a man who loves God *more than anything else* (Matt. 22, 37 & 38) will deviate less than that of one who loves (i) other men, (ii) nature for itself, (iii) animals, (iv) himself, (v) power or any other creature better than or instead of God.

This condition is recognisable in various forms of art when technique becomes *more* important than content. A pagan who kisses a tree worships God in ignorance, he adores a work of God for he recognises a tree as something he could not himself create; if he bows down to the sun he acknowledges in his own way the 'glory of God' which the 'heavens declare'. But the man who draws, paints or models a tree or a sunrise not because he loves it but because he loves drawing, painting or modelling *for themselves* is an idolater: he worships either the tree or the sunrise in itself or his own cleverness in drawing, painting or modelling it. Such men are closed within the prison of the finite and corruptible; they really belong to Satan, they are walking in the dark towards death. For only through Christ the Word have men either light or life.

At the other end of the scale there is the extreme example of the aversion from the love and praise of God which is found in the thought of the atheist existentialist Sartre. According to his Catholic friend Gabriel Marcel (*The Philosophy of Existence*; London, Harvill Press), 'Sartre is condemned to freedom' and Sartre himself says that existence itself is unnecessary, *redundant*; he is in agony to find himself alone with his own being. And here is the interesting point: this philosophy has a truly diabolical quality, its life is hate; so the reasoning of Sartre has led him to the truth: the truth of a world without a Spiritual Creator. This is also a fine example of how the pride of the devil leads to his exposure; there is nothing lovable or convincing about the picture of life which can be derived from the philosophy of Sartre, but 'it is a *logically true* one, given his starting point: no God. (Marcel his Christian friend

has a great admiration for the powers of his mind.) Nevertheless one is inclined to believe that comparatively few human beings could accept his account as totally true, and thus the very fineness of his reasoning will throw them back into the arms of God; for most men desire life and 'Sartre's doctrine is a doctrine of death' (Marcel).

The truth is that man has the power to condemn himself to death or to co-operate with the divine redemption which can raise him to his proper end, eternal life. God has visited his people and his saving power is available to men in many ways. The Christian is strengthened by the Sacraments of the Church bestowed by words and symbols, by the truth taught in the Church by words; the Creator descends upon his creatures and uses their means to communicate with them. He is moved by love and the creature must love in return; he must will to rise towards the Creator: he must correspond to the movement of love given him by the action of the Holy Spirit; the great wind and the glowing fire to kindle his heart. And just to show the abyss separating a purely spiritual God from his creatures of body and spirit, God shows the comparative 'nothingness' of our 'words' by communicating his Word in the silent emptiness of contemplative prayer. This is a gift mysterious beyond all others. Just as a bee's body transmutes the nectar it gathers from the flowers into honey, so the human soul has power, in a more mysterious way, to transmute the silent communications of God into words. The unimaginable force of the love of God for his creatures according to the mode of each Person of the Holy Trinity, awaits the free turning of man, made in the image of the Trinity, fit to receive him, to burst upon him in a torrent of grace.

Although the world has perhaps never appeared so obviously 'fallen' as it does today it is at the same time possible to hope that the means for the 'salvation of the nations' are also more clearly seen than in the past. The object of these notes is to direct attention upon one in particular: the dissemination of the spoken and the written word. This essentially human and spiritual activity has tremendous power today. The fact that printed bits of paper are able to give or to deprive men of food, clothes, nationality

or means of life, seems on reflection, like a bad joke of the devil's; but the power is there, a world-wide instrument for the redemptive action of Christ the Word.

If all men are to be drawn into unity with Christ, he must first be 'lifted up', through the lives, the words and works of Christians, whose words and works manifest Christ the Word because they receive their light and life from him. And the Christians themselves cannot be satisfied with half-measures; in their religious life they must not be satisfied to wander in by-ways and drink from little streamlets which happen to cross the path, they must return daily to the fountain itself, from which in five minutes they can receive as much living water as in weeks of small sips elsewhere. This fountainhead is the Bible and Liturgy of the Church; changing the metaphor, one might say that in them we find the receiving end of a heavenly broadcast. Those who turn aside from this unique source of communion with Christ the Word are doing the devil's work for him; in the day-by-day cycle of the Church's Liturgy we have the true, 'daily bread', the food of life fortified by the Sacramental body of Christ which reminds us each time we see or feel it of the Incarnation, the oneness in Christ of all creation, and the unity of man's body and soul.

Now, in this atomic age, when we realise more fully than in the past how the universe and the finite world we live in may be subdued to the will of man, now is the time to restore *all things* to Christ: every Christian needs to be nourished by Christ the word: in particular the creative artist, whether he works in words, stones, paint or music is restoring the creation to Christ, giving him back with love; what is his. Provided the artist is inspired by love of God may we not see in works of great beauty the unmistakable trace of the threefold image of God—Father, creator; Holy Spirit, inspiring force of love; and the Incarnate Word manifested by his creature? And thus through union of man with Christ 'All the works of the Lord bless the Lord: praise and exalt him for ever', in this world imperfectly and in Eternity perfectly.