

rich supply of Scriptural material for prayer, more Scripture to be prayed.

Even, however, if we believe such reforms feasible and desirable, we should not lose sight of the fact that in the present Missal and Office what I have called the concentrated essence of Scripture is already at our disposition as matter for prayer. If we will pray it, we shall penetrate to the heart of Scripture by a vital contact and, as I have said, shall find it to be the Communion of Saints and Souls, our Lady, Jesus Christ and, to sum up all, God.



IMAGES OF THE BIBLE¹

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I NEED first of all to explain my title. The images which I want to think about are primarily images in the mind rather than actual pictures, statues, or such like; or rather I want to think about actual pictures from the point of view of the image which they evoke, and leave behind in the memory, which may live and grow there, and become part—a vital part—of that stock of symbols which in some sense or other exists in all our minds. Because it is in this way that images are part of the life of the Spirit. Or to put it in another way, the activity of the imagination is or should be part of religion—like every other human activity—and needs therefore to be trained and fed. The Church has, we all know, always believed in images; but it is so often thought today that the nature of the image does not matter, provided that it promotes devotion. But do we know how much harm a false image does?—one for instance of our Lord, always there in the memory, with no hint in it of the supernatural? Perhaps Providence protects us, but to put it at the least, are we not losing a wonderful enrichment and vivification of an essential part of our minds (always active, remembering, using therefore other images) by acquiescing in our

¹ The substance of the paper read at the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, 17 September, 1953.

present poverty? And I do not mean an enrichment in artistic wealth, but in spiritual life.

I want to make one other point about my subject. Originally I was asked to talk about the Bible and the family; and I am still thinking of what I have to say as in the first instance concerned with children. The best way of getting to know the Bible is to my mind to read it as a child, aloud, in common, either at home or at school. I envisage the sort of pictures that I would like to see in circulation, as it were as a sort of imaginative food for children, accompanying Bible reading. It would seem to me a great loss to show the pictures without having read the inspired words which they visualize.

It is important to start with children, partly because children particularly think in images. So often they can express themselves in drawings before they can put their thoughts into writing, or even into words. Indeed of course children are habitually shown pictures of all sorts from the beginning, more than ever so today in schools, with the increasing use of visual aids. And the images which we see in childhood are so apt to remain with us with peculiar vividness, seen, experienced, and remembered in a way which one cannot later recapture. How important, therefore, that they should include images, true visions, of God, heaven, the Bible. Some people think that children should only be shown the little, mild, trivial aspect of things; to my mind they should be given the best, the most comprehensive. No doubt they cannot understand; but surely like great poetry learnt by heart one can grow into an understanding, as one grows in experience and knowledge, of partially comprehended words and visions held by the imagination? These are part of our mind and therefore of the terms in which we cannot help but think; formative of our thought.

I would like to suggest here the sort of relation which I understand to be between my subject and the idea of symbolism. I see the image as a part, not necessary, but normal, of the symbol. I suppose that most people have some visualization, probably rather vague, of the symbolic conceptions in their minds. I feel that the precise, living visualizations of these things which our fellow Christians have made in the

past, and will we hope indeed be making in the present, can enlarge and above all vivify our use of that way of thinking. That after all is the human and the christian way of learning, not alone, but by making our own the large experience of others, particularly of those who can record and transmit. The image is an extension of the symbol; and living symbols are part of the life of the imagination. All around us we see a need to use, rediscover, the basic primitive symbols; apart from psychological studies, one sees in so much modern poetry and painting a search for the half-known symbolic roots of sensibility and thought. Most of this is very far, consciously, from the Church, and yet she has all these same basic primitive symbols that we seek, enriched and enlightened by revelation, only they seem to have become rationalized, lost their root in the imagination, become so often a mere archaic code. It seems somehow that just because we Catholics have the tradition of these things, which are a contemporary need, to us they are dead, while to others is the wonder of rediscovery. Must this be so?

We are some of us, I think, rather over-oppressed with being out of touch with the roots of symbolism. Water and bread are not urgent needs of life, binding us to the earth and the seasons. The townsman, and to a greater or lesser extent all of us living in the fantastic artificial structure of modern life (is it a Tower of Babel?) are out of touch with the rhythms and normal expression in terms of natural life. I wonder. I fancy the response is there still; if water does not immediately convey to us all that it meant to the peasant, the living and life-giving quality of flowing limpid water is surely an inalienable symbol, like the engulfing sea, and the green growing grass, and something not always realized can perhaps be the more vividly discovered? I wonder if it is not possible, perhaps necessary, for us to approach the thing backwards? In the Church is the extension of symbolic meaning; can we not refind the rhythm of the seasons through that of the liturgical year, the commonness of bread in the Eucharist? I would like to suggest that sort of way with images. We have lost, except for children, the power to express ourselves unselfconsciously in symbols and images. We have pretty well lost the power to look at them simply.

We look at them as a means to an end—to promote devotion, or as a subject of study, to determine the date and artist, to distinguish and trace style and iconography; or from the artist's point of view the work is looked at as self-expression. All this seems to me a loss, a typical process of disintegration, which has had a terribly destructive effect on living art. But we have after all a gain; our potential experience is enormously enlarged; modern mechanization offers to us now the whole world of the art of the past. If we have lost immediate contact with the natural world and family tradition we are offered instead greater contact with the human past, and the great range of christian symbolic experience; can we not recapture what we have lost that way?

I am thinking particularly of the art that I have been looking at recently, that of medieval MSS, which of their nature cannot, without reproduction, be known to more than a few in each generation. I do not want to suggest any revivalism. Conscious revivalism seems to me almost necessarily dead from the beginning. But that we should look at and use the work of christian artists of all and any time, in so far as we find them usable, just as we use christian writings of all or any time. Are not illustrations to the Bible in the nature of commentaries on the Bible?

I seem to have got rather far from images of the Bible. That is not my intention. I have meant these thoughts in that context; because after all the Bible is the source of practically all christian imagery. Perhaps the words and stories of the Bible themselves alone evoke images, and that is enough for many people; and so often—for instance in the *Canticle*—the imagery is verbal and not visual. Indeed it is surprising, considering the immense richness of the Bible, and its extension in the liturgy, to note for how comparatively short a period the potentialities have been exploited. My slight studies of biblical illustration suggest that it follows the same pattern as the history of biblical studies. The vital biblical illustrations, those which are really concerned with the text and its spiritual meaning, which were done by great artists who at the same time knew and prayed the Bible, were done between the ninth and the

thirteenth centuries; and the tradition from which much of this art was derived was undoubtedly that of MSS dating from the patristic period, now unfortunately mostly lost. Of course, there is an immense amount of biblical illustration after the thirteenth century, not only the innumerable representations of particular scenes, which we know so well, but also the 'moralized' and pictorial Bibles, which were also among the earliest printed books. But these latter were frankly popularizing, didactic works, illustrating the text (and often apocryphal incidents as well) in great detail, with great liveliness, but not, it seems to me, in so far as I have looked at them, with anything of the spiritual understanding of earlier works.

There are two sorts of images, or aspects, of the biblical illustrations of this earlier and comparatively little-known period in art which I wish to distinguish. The first is that which directly uses symbolism; where one realizes that the artist is always conscious of the 'spiritual meaning' of the scene he represents. He may actually represent the sacrifice of Isaac in the same composition as the Crucifixion, or he may illustrate Psalm 68 with a representation of Jonah, or he may draw the Marriage of the Lamb of the Apocalypse and one will recognize in the Lamb the innocence, the sacrifice and all those extensions of meaning in the imagination which the biblical context evokes. That, it seems to me, is a living symbol. But the source of its life is in the Bible reading of the artist and of those for whom the picture is made. It must be both sides; it is surely extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the artist to work with living symbols unless he knows that they already live in the minds of others. It is just this lack of a common source book, a common myth as poets say, which has made modern art so inarticulate, reduced artists and poets either to using private symbols or ones so elementary (as in abstract art) that it seems that they are equally unintelligible; or to superficialities.

The second sort of image is the vision. I should like to apply to it Goethe's definition of the symbol quoted by Fr Bede Griffiths: 'a revelation of the unfathomable in a moment of life'. I found when I came to consider which biblical illustrations had impressed me most, those which

came to my mind were of conceptions which one would *a priori* expect it least possible to visualize: pictures of God, of angels, of heaven. Yet these are the ones which seem to me of all possibly most fruitful. One reads of prayer leading people beyond images; I would like to suggest that there are some images, which may perhaps not so much be discarded as seen through. I am thinking particularly of visions like those of some of the Ottonian painters or of Anglo-Saxon drawings. In the latter one sees so clearly how a drawing of a figure is only the means of expressing the attitude of a soul. Anglo-Saxon MSS are full of all sorts of wonderful drawings of prayer, from the penitence of Adam to the walking with God of Enoch, through all the vicissitudes of the Psalmist. Art is after all a sort of imitation of the Incarnation, as it strives to capture, materialize and so communicate a revelation of what is not material. It is natural to us to start with the idea of God as such an image rather than as an intellectual concept.



AMONG PERIODICALS DEVOTED TO SCRIPTURE, the English Quarterly of the Catholic Biblical Association (now published by Nelson, 2s. a copy, 8s. 6d. per annum) makes its notable contribution. In particular it is keeping up with the latest MSS. discoveries. The Dead Sea Scrolls are proving of intense interest and importance to scholars, and in this quarterly the ordinary reader is given a chance to learn about their contents and importance. *Bible et Vie Chrétienne* (Casterman, Paris) has now concluded its first year and it has shown itself to be of first-class value to the general reader and the student; we may hope that the English quarterly will increase its circulation so that it can follow in the tracks of its French contemporary. Of note is an article by Dom Charlier on 'the biblical movement at the crossroads' and a charmingly illustrated discussion of the Adoration of the Magi in twelfth-century art. *The Friends' Quarterly* occupies many of the pages of its autumn (1953) number with articles on the Bible to celebrate the Triple Jubilee of the British and Foreign Bible Society.