

LECTIO DIVINA¹

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE BIBLE

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IN the Rule of St Benedict the monastic day is divided into three unequal periods. The longest is that which is given to manual work, which might amount to as much as seven hours. The others, which were roughly equal and amounted to about half that time, were given to prayer, or the 'work of God', and to *lectio divina* or sacred reading. Each of these elements in the monastic life, as we hope to show, were intimately related to one another, but it is with the *lectio divina* that we are primarily concerned today. There is no doubt of the nature of this reading in the time of St Benedict and in the centuries which followed. It was confined at first to the study of the Bible and the Fathers, especially the Latin Fathers, and above all St Jerome and St Augustine. To these were added later, perhaps through the influence of Cassiodorus, some of the classical writers, but the typical Benedictine study has always remained the Bible and the Fathers. This is what gives its particular character to the Benedictine spirit; it is founded on the ancient tradition of patristic learning before the rise of scholastic philosophy. Even so great a scholar as Mabillon in the seventeenth century could still maintain that scholastic philosophy and theology were not suited to the study of a monk in the same way as the writings of the Fathers. What is the reason for this? We would like to suggest that there are two perfectly distinct habits of mind and methods of learning, which may be called the ancient and the modern, and between which the great divide occurred roughly in the thirteenth century. We would then like to go on to suggest that we ourselves, whether monks or laymen, stand in the greatest need at the present time of recovering this ancient tradition of learning and discovering a new approach to the Bible.

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The position of St Thomas in this respect is of great interest, because he stood exactly at the point of division. Thus one can look at St Thomas in one of two ways: either as the beginning or the end of an age. One can see him, as is the method of the modern theological text-book, as forming the basis of theology. By this method the theses of St Thomas are taken as the starting point and they are then 'illustrated' more or less aptly with selected quotations from the Bible and the Fathers. This method has obvious advantages as a method of teaching and admirably serves the purposes of examinations. But it is clearly not historical. The other method is to follow history and take the Bible as the foundation of theology, and then to trace the gradual development of Christian doctrine from the Old and the New Testaments through the Fathers and the Councils, until it reaches its logical culmination in the work of St Thomas and the schoolmen. This is a method of study which has steadily developed since the time of Newman and is characteristic of the best work which is being done today. But though it gives a far deeper understanding than the other method, it is far more subtle and complex and much less amenable to an examination system. For it is not simply a question of an historical method. As soon as we begin to study the Bible, not merely as an illustration of later modes of thought but in its own intrinsic mode, we find that we are being led, as I have suggested, into a totally different mode of thought and expression. We have become so accustomed to the rational and discursive mode of philosophy and theology that we tend to think that this is the only normal method of study and thought. But the fact is that this mode of thought is comparatively modern. It is something which we owe almost entirely to the Greeks and it came into existence in about the sixth century B.C. But the Bible belongs to a totally different world and inherits a tradition of thought which is quite distinct from this.

In all the ancient world from the earliest times of which we have any knowledge men were in the habit of thinking not in terms of abstract reason but of concrete symbolism. This is the mode of thought which underlies all the ancient myths and all the ancient forms of religion, and this is the

distinctive mode of Biblical thought. This difference between rational and what I have called symbolic thought was well described by the Italian Vico, who was one of the first to attempt a philosophy of history. 'Man', he says, 'before he has arrived at the stage of forming universals, forms imaginary ideas. Before he reflects with a clear mind, he apprehends with faculties confused and distorted; before he can articulate he sings; before speaking in prose, he speaks in verse; before using technical terms, he uses metaphor, and the metaphorical use of words is as natural to him as that which we call natural.' It is clear that there is a whole theory of human nature and human development implied in this, which it is impossible to discuss here, but I hope that it will be allowed as a matter of historical fact that the capacity of poetic or metaphorical thought is generally found to be developed before the habit of rational prosaic thought. This means simply that primitive man thinks in terms not of abstract ideas (for which the very terms do not exist in his vocabulary) but of concrete images, and he reasons by means of analogy: for metaphor is based essentially on the discovery of analogies between apparently diverse things. These analogies are, of course, often fanciful; as Vico says, primitive man's thought is often 'confused and distorted', but it may also be most profound and exact. What we are considering is, in fact, the power of poetic thought, and the great poet is one who has learned to discover the hidden analogies which underlie the face of nature and to give them the most exact expression.

No one has thought more deeply on this subject than Goethe, and it was he who said: 'A man born and bred in the so-called exact sciences in the height of his analytical reason will not easily comprehend that there is something like an exact concrete imagination'. It is this 'exact concrete imagination' which concerns us when we come to interpret Hebrew thought. It is a mode of thought which is as completely valid as that of the 'analytical reason' but it is quite distinct. There is no need to set up one against the other; each mode of thought is necessary to a completely human understanding. But we must learn to recognize this other mode of the imagination and to interpret it according to its

own laws. It is useless to approach the Bible with all the paraphernalia of scholastic theology in our minds and to measure it by that standard. Such knowledge is necessary and will take its place in our final judgment on the inspired word; but we have to approach it as we approach poetry and allow its own proper influence upon us. We have to learn to think in symbols and to discover the divine mystery beneath the living symbols through which it chose to reveal itself. Perhaps another quotation from Goethe will help us to understand the meaning of a symbol. 'The true symbol', he says, 'is the representation of the general through the particular, not however as a dream or a shadow but as the revelation of the unfathomable in a moment of life.' Here we touch on its deepest meaning; a symbol is a revelation of the general or universal not in an abstract concept but in a 'moment of life' that is a lived experience, in which the 'unfathomable' that is the divine mystery itself is disclosed to us. We can understand now why it was that the divine revelation of the Scriptures was communicated to us in symbolic terms. It is through the symbol that the divine mystery is revealed to us not as an abstract idea but as a living person, as concrete reality.

We know how these symbols underlie all religious experience from the beginning of history. We have only to think of the symbols of the Father and the Mother, the two most profound and ancient symbols of the divine. The Sanscrit *Dyaus-pita*, the Latin *Jupiter*, the Greek *Zeus Pater*, all alike represent God as the Sky-Father, and our Lord himself could find no better terms in which to speak of God than as our Father in heaven. As for the Mother, we know that in her various shapes as the Syrian *Astarte*, the Egyptian *Isis*, the Greek *Demeter*, the Latin *Ceres*, the Earth-Mother with her son or daughter, *Baal* or *Osiris*, *Persephone* or *Proserpine*, is at the very heart of ancient religion and her place is taken in catholicism by the figure of mother Church and the motherhood of *Mary*. Again, when divine revelation would speak to us of the mystery of the Trinity it makes use of the symbols of the Word and the Breath, symbols which occur throughout the ancient world; and when it would speak of the baptism of a Christian it uses

the symbols of a new birth by water and of the light of Faith. In all this divine revelation is making use of a language of symbolism which is the universal inheritance of mankind, a language which was understood by all ancient peoples and by all simple people until recent times, but which has begun to lose its meaning for us under the influence of rationalistic thought. There is one other example of this universal symbolism which may be mentioned in passing, the symbolism of numbers. Is it an accident that we speak of One God in Three Persons; that we have four gospels and seven sacraments; that our Lord chose twelve apostles and sent out seventy-two disciples to preach; that he fasted forty days, that he rose on the third day? The Fathers well understood that there is a mystery in all these numbers, and anyone who knows anything of ancient Egyptian or Babylonian or Indian or Chinese thought will know that there is a profound symbolism in the use of numbers. The Old Testament is often unintelligible without some knowledge of this science of numbers of which the significance has been almost completely lost.

But though this universal language of symbolism underlies the biblical revelation, the symbols of the Bible have none the less a very special character. They are essentially historical symbols. The original revelation to mankind, which is typified by the Covenant with Noe and had for its sign the Rainbow, was a revelation of the natural order; God revealed himself through the signs of nature, the movement of the stars, the rhythm of the seasons. But the revelation which was made to Abraham was the beginning of a historical revelation; the divine mystery was manifested in a series of historical events culminating in the life and death and resurrection of Christ. Thus the symbols under which this revelation was made have always a definite historical character. We may see this best if we take one of the original and most fundamental of all the symbols of the Old Testament: that of the Promised Land. 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house, unto the Land which I will show thee', it was said to Abraham (Gen. 12, 1). This is a definite historical event, the beginning of the history of a particular people, which can be related to

contemporary history. It is moreover the promise of a definite land. It is not only historical, it is geographical. The land is the land of Canaan, and from this time the fortunes of the people will be bound up with the fate of the land. We can trace the development of the promise step by step from Abraham to Isaac, to Jacob, and to Moses, until finally Joshue enters into the land and the people are settled in it. Then comes the establishment of the kingdom under David, the building of the Temple by Solomon. The Land and the People, the Kingdom and the Temple, each is a definite historical reality. But now there occurs an astonishing change. No sooner has the promise been fulfilled in the temporal sphere than the whole thing collapses. The Temple is destroyed, the Kingdom comes to an end, the people is led away captive, the land is left desolate. It seems that the promise has failed.

But it is now that the real significance of these things begins to be revealed. Amid the desolation of the temporal and material world the prophets begin to look forward to a return of the people to the land. Once again one can trace the long course of the development of the idea of the land through the prophets, beginning with the first of the prophets Amos and continuing through to the last prophet Malachi. Here it will be sufficient to point out the main lines of its development. We find that the idea of the land undergoes, like all the other symbols which we have mentioned, a profound transformation. The return to the land begins to be seen as man's return to the land of Paradise from which he had been driven forth. The Messianic age is seen as the restoration of man to the state of original justice, in which the Spirit is poured out upon him and there is no more conflict, 'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks', and nature is once more at peace with herself; 'The wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together' (Isaias 11, 6). Gradually it appears that the whole earth is to be transformed; 'The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose . . . they shall see the glory of the Lord and the excellency

of our God' (Isaias 35, 1-2). Until finally the prophet's vision sees beyond the Land of Promise, beyond the earthly Paradise to the creation of the world and he looks forward to a new creation: 'For behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered nor come into the mind' (Isaias 65, 17). Could anything be more marvellous than this transformation under the light of divine revelation of the humble return of a group of Jewish captives to their land into the vision of a new creation?

The Land like all the other signs of the Old Testament has now become a symbol of a new order of being which is about to be revealed. In order to see the final evolution of these symbols we have to turn to the New Testament. It is impossible now to do more than indicate how the whole revelation of the New Testament is given in terms of this historical symbolism. The two fundamental ideas of the gospel teaching, that of the Messiah and his Kingdom, are clearly in the direct line of development from the Old Testament. But to those who would like to see how intricate and comprehensive is the symbolism of the gospels I would recommend the recent *Study in St Mark* by Dr Austin Farrer. It may not be necessary to follow every step of Dr Farrer's exegesis, but that the main lines of it are true there can scarcely be any doubt. It shows that St Mark's gospel, which is usually thought to be the most simple and naïve of all the gospels, is in fact a closely woven tissue of symbolism from beginning to end. No more perfect example could be found of what we have called the mode of symbolic thought. For us now it will be sufficient to indicate just two references to the land in the gospels which may easily be overlooked. There is first the reference in the Beatitudes, which is unfortunately obscured by the usual translation. 'Blessed are the meek, it is said, for they shall inherit (not the earth, but) the *land*' (Matt. 5, 4). How much significance this gains when it is related to the original promise of the land! Then there are the words of our Lord to the thief on the cross: 'I promise thee this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise' (Luke 23, 43). Is any more evidence needed that our Lord himself habitually thought and spoke in terms of this ancient symbolism?

But the authentic interpretation of the symbol of the Land is, of course, to be found in the Epistle to the Hebrews. There we are told of the patriarchs of the Old Testament: 'It was faith they lived by, all of them, and in faith they died; for them the promises were not fulfilled, but they looked forward to them and welcomed them from a distance, owning themselves no better than strangers and exiles on earth. Those who talk so make it clear that they have not found their home. Did they regret the country they had left behind? If that were all they could have found opportunities for going back to it. No, the country of their desires is a better country, a heavenly country. God does not disdain to take his title from such names as these; he has a city ready for them to dwell in' (Heb. 11, 13-6). Here then we have the mystery of the Land finally revealed: it is a 'heavenly country', the place into which the people of God is to enter at the end of time. It is one with the new creation, the city of God, the kingdom which has been prepared from the foundation of the world. Thus as we trace them to their conclusion all these symbols are found to coalesce; they are all but aspects in human terms of that unfathomable mystery which is the object of our faith.

But when we have traced them to their conclusion, have they no further function to perform? It is here that we have to begin to relate our *lectio divina* to the other elements of the monastic day. If our study of the Bible remains a thing apart, it will bear no fruit: all this symbolism will simply be reduced like everything else to an abstract scheme. It is only when our meditation on the Bible is brought into vital relation with our life of prayer that it begins deeply to affect our lives. For these mysteries of faith are not shut up in a book; they are continuously operative in our lives. The mysteries which were prepared in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New continue to energize in the life of the Church. The mighty acts of God in the Old Testament and the New are continued in the present time, as Père Danielou has said, in the sacraments of the Church. Under the same symbols as they were originally presented, they continue to operate among us. At our baptism we begin to enter into the Promised Land; we go beneath the waters of

the Flood, and rise again as members of a new creation. We are restored to Paradise and clothed again in the garments of Justice; we are given the Holy Spirit, the 'pledge of our inheritance'. In the Eucharist we are fed with the bread of the Land, the fruit of the tree of Life; we drink the new wine which our Lord promised us when he said: 'I shall not drink of this fruit of the vine, until I drink it with you, new wine, in the kingdom of God'. But unfortunately all this symbolism tends to be lost on us. The sacraments are said to 'effect what they signify', but our theology, as Père Danielou has again said, tends to consider almost exclusively the causal efficacy of the sacraments and to neglect altogether the mode of their signification. It is here that our study of the symbolism of the Bible can assist us: for the symbolism of the sacraments is based, as we have seen and as Père Danielou has shown at length in his book, *Bible et Liturgie*, on the symbolism of the Bible.

But if these symbols are to have their proper effect on us, we must learn to experience their power as creative energies and not allow them to become mental abstractions. For all these symbols have their roots not in the conscious but in the unconscious mind. The earth and the water, the bread and the wine, the Land and the people, the kingdom and the Temple, all these are symbols derived from the archetypes of the unconscious, going back in their origin to the collective experience of mankind and forming the basis of all religion. If we are to experience their power we have to recover for ourselves that primeval habit of thought from which they spring. This means that we have to undergo nothing less than a conversion. We have ourselves to go under the waters of the unconscious; we have to return to the land of our origin and renew our contact with mother earth. For we are all exiles from this lost Paradise, we have become separated from our Mother, we are wandering in a far country, away from our Father's home. We have, then, to find the Land within ourselves; it is a psychological change of a depth which we hardly suspect. It involves an Exodus from this world, from Egypt and Babylon; it leads to a long and difficult journey in the wilderness, in which the pillar of cloud is our only light. But only through this

experience can we come to understand the mystery of our faith.

This experience of a return to the Land is something which we have each to discover for ourselves, but at the same time we shall find that it leads to a profound and new sense of community. For these symbols of the unconscious are communal symbols; they are derived from the collective memory of mankind. Thus as we begin to discover the mystery of the land we shall discover also the mystery of the People. We shall recover our sense of community with all mankind; we shall become aware of our membership of a common body. The *res*, the thing signified by the sacrament of the Eucharist, is the 'unity of the Body of Christ'. By sharing a meal together, by partaking of the fruits of the Land, we are incorporated into the 'people of God'; we become members of that new humanity, which is being created out of the peoples of this world, in which there is 'no more Jew or Gentile, no more slave nor freeman, no more male and female, but all are one in Christ'. This is the mystery of the new Adam, the whole and perfect man, for which all mankind is created. In it there are no distinctions of race or of class, or even of sex. It is a return to the original unity of man, before there was any division of tongues, before the rib of the woman was taken from the body of man. For just as the return to the Land is a return to the Mother which must take place within, so the restoration of the people is a return to unity, a marriage of the male and the female, which must also take place within.

We have seen now something of how the symbolism of the Bible, operating in our life of prayer through the sacraments and liturgy of the Church, can become a source of new life and of penetration into the mystery of faith. It remains in conclusion to relate it to the third element in the monastic life, the work of the hands. This relation is of significance not merely to the monastic life but to all Christian life. For all Christian study and prayer must issue in action. What form, then, will this symbolic mode of thought and prayer take in action? Will it not issue in a literal return to the Land? There is an organic relation between man and the earth upon which the health, both physical and moral,

of all human society depends. During the last two centuries our civilization has gradually lost this vital relationship, just as the Roman civilization did before. We shall not have a genuine Christian culture again until there has been another Exodus, a going forth from the mechanistic mode of life and thought, which is the mode of our present civilization. We shall have to discover a new agriculture, which will not be dependent on an industrialist system, based on machines and chemicals, but will be an organic mode of life in which man enters once more into vital relation with the rhythm of nature and takes his place in the divine order. This will mean inevitably a period of segregation in the wilderness, a living by faith in the promise of the land and in the protection of divine providence. But from it there will arise again a sense of community, of belonging to a people with a destiny and a mission. It is only within a Christian community, living on the land and working for its living in obedience to the divine command, that a new sense of values will emerge. We shall then have a new craftsmanship, derived from an organic relation to the land and from a sense of values shared in common.

When this basis of agriculture and craftsmanship, of a people living on and from its land, has been established, then it will be possible to begin to build the City and the Temple, to discover a new form of Christian civilization, of Christian art and culture. For all these things can only emerge from a new consciousness, a new way of thinking and feeling, such as I have tried to suggest the biblical revelation offers to us. But before this can come to pass, there will have to be another development; there will have to be a meeting of east and west. It is no longer possible to think of a Christian civilization which is anything less than universal. But if this meeting is to be effective, it must take place on the deepest level of life and thought. For centuries now the west has followed the path of rational discursive thought, but the east has remained true to the tradition of intuitive and symbolic thought. The meeting between east and west will be a meeting between these two modes, in which if it is to be fruitful a true marriage must take place. Catholicism has shared this tendency of the western mind,

and we shall not recover this tradition, which belonged to our faith when it was still an oriental religion, until we have been brought into vital contact with the eastern mind. The two halves of mankind, the male and the female, the rational and the intuitive, the practical and the contemplative, have to be united before the new man can be born, in whom there is neither male nor female, nor east nor west, but all are one in Christ.

Thus our consideration of *lectio divina* leads us to the conception of a new mode of thought, in which we can once again recover the depths of the biblical tradition and acquire a new insight into the mystery of faith, which may eventually lead to a new mode of life and a new form of Christian civilization.



SCRIPTURE AND THE LITURGY¹

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WHEN St Dominic's successor, Blessed Jordan of Saxony, a man remarkable for shrewd common sense, was asked which was better, studying the Scriptures or praying, he replied: You might as well ask me which is better, eating or drinking. A meticulous critic might argue that liquid nourishment is even more indispensable than solid, that no man can be saved without prayer, that prayer can save those ignorant of the Scriptures. In the concrete, however, for ourselves, Scripture and prayer, like eating and drinking, are indispensable.

Must they however be wholly separated? Can they not be, to a considerable extent at least, combined? They can, because they are.

The liturgy—Mass and Divine Office—is largely (the Office mostly) prayer in the words of Scripture, and both Mass and Office provide lessons from Scripture. The liturgical Gospels cover the greater part of the Fourth Gospel, and for a rough guess two-thirds of St Matthew and a half of St Luke. Only St Mark is little read. All the major

¹ The substance of a paper read to the Conference on 17 September, 1953.