

ON READING THE BIBLE: II

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AS we have seen in the first half of this article the Old Testament ends, apart from the historical interlude of the Machabees, with the Prophets and their vision of all in God's hands. The worst that could happen, destruction, deportation, or death, is understood, as punishment from God. It is a marvellous vision, all the more so, first of all, for being in our world, and very much in our world; for the prophetic career is like any other, with its ups and downs. The book of *Jonas*, for instance ('Dove'; but also 'Destroyer'), shows us some of the downs.

We are told that Jonas has a message for Nineveh. Now no one likes to go into a strange town, especially with unpleasant messages; so Jonas runs away in a ship. There is a storm; the sailors cast lots to find the unlucky one; and the lot falls, of course, upon Jonas. He is thrown overboard, at his own request, in fact; as the waters close over his head he must think, 'At least, it's the end of that message.' But no, a great fish comes up and gulps him down; carries him in his stomach for three days—while Jonas sings a little song of distress and trust—but when God tells it, coughs him up on the shore. Jonas gets up, and goes to Nineveh this time; prophesies its destruction in a few days; and then waits outside the city to see it happen. But his preaching is successful; the Ninevites repent, as is intended all along; God, of course, does not destroy them: and, it seems, cannot understand why Jonas is so piqued. He grows him a shady plant—actually the castor-oil plant—and then destroys it with a worm, to remove one pique by the other. He did not want his little plant destroyed: but the city; with all the children! And, God adds, so many innocent animals!

The Prophets' vision is in this world then, as we see; but does not end there; in the vision of Isaias, for instance, where he sees God between two burning lights, the *seraphim*, each with 'six wings': the sun, and the full moon, perhaps, facing it, at each end of the sky, with the 'cross' halo they have in our eyes like

pairs of wings above and below, and one out on each side. With the five planets we can see, they may be the seven Rulers or archangels; not just seen as heavenly 'bodies', but felt, as Presences, moving and purposeful; and above them, the still, countless, mysterious lights, the stars; where God, the Lord of their hosts, is felt to reside.

There is the weird vision of Ezechiel, seen in fire and light and thunder, of the four beings, or *cherubim*, under God; a picture perhaps of the world itself under God, with the four beings as the four corners, the 'poles' or 'ends' of the earth; each four-faced, to show God's wisdom, power, strength and vigour, in the man, lion, ox and eagle heads; four-winged, with two wings touching the wings of the ones beside it, as each direction 'reaches' to the next (their wings 'joined'), yet is distinct from them (two 'covered their bodies'). But directions extend indefinitely (they all 'go straight forward') and turn (each is 'on a wheel') in every way (on 'wheels in wheels . . .') that we can see ('. . . full of eyes'). The Prophet, in fact, sees the whole world in the live creatures; 'on top of the temple': as the world turns on the temple, for him. But there is more than that: over the creatures a vault, 'terrible to look at'; on the vault an invisible ('sapphire') throne; on the throne 'something like a man', too intensely visible ('on fire') to be really seen, with all colours ('like a rainbow') streaming from him.

The Prophet is making us see God, above our world. In their very different ways, all these prophets are giving us one vision; long, complicated, often apparently contradictory, but a single vision. We can describe it as the Reign of God, over all; which means for them now, that their troubles are inflicted by God himself; and that, if so, a Suffering Servant is what the Jew must be, the Jew who is wholly faithful; the remnant, at least, who must suffer this anger of God faithfully, with a faith that is rewarded, that will save. They speak of the Leader, the Anointed (*Messias*) who would save; but as all hope in men, in actual rescuers, recedes, the conviction grows that it must be God himself, in some way, who will come and save. This is where we Christians, in our belief, part company with the Jews, and with everyone else in the world. He came.

The story of Jesus Christ, his teaching and death, is the 'New Testament', foreshadowed and prefigured by the Old; the new

dealing with God. We have his life recorded there; we can follow him, for page after page. His life has become the world's best-known story; but its tragedy continues still, in that it seems ineffective to so many people today; clouded, in their eyes, by sheer fairy-tale. There is tragedy for us, too, perhaps, in not realizing how strange and far-away its atmosphere of angels and miracles is, and is meant to be; by its very familiarity also, it can lose its effect. The atmosphere is there; if we try to clear it away, as a web of fantasy, from the 'real' Jesus, we leave an Ideal Man with noble sentiments to impart; not the Jesus that lives in our minds in this atmosphere, and needs this atmosphere to live.

There are famous paintings by Fra Angelico depicting scenes in the Gospels, especially the cross; and at the foot, either embracing or grasping it in an access of grief, the figure of St Dominic. Now it would be foolish to object that St Dominic lived a thousand years later and could not possibly have been present at the scene; but still more foolish to counter with a theory of the miraculous translation of St Dominic to the time and place of the passion. The whole idea of the painter is to make St Dominic see our Lord suffering as if suffering before him; and our Lord, while suffering, see St Dominic watching him; St Dominic is *imagined* there. We shall be shocked at this only if we view imagination as something slight, unreal irresponsible. Imagination is behind all thinking and seeing, the necessary accompaniment of all thought and volition; for by it, we put the world together out of the sounds and colours that we hear and see; because we do not hear or see things: we picture things. In the Gospels we are being made to picture the God Man.

But this is not to say that things were not happening; they were, obvious and outstanding, as we are told quite clearly and simply; miracles of healing, restoring to life, providing food and wine. Although we are naturally unwilling to believe stories of unusual and uncanny events, instinctively preferring our familiar, humdrum, securities, nevertheless we must not let that feeling make us disbelieve stories that are true. The inconsequential detail of reality ('Now there were six waterpots of stone . . .'), the spontaneous reaction of onlookers ('And the steward said to the bridegroom . . .') is always there to convince us. And there remains the supreme and final wonder, forming the apex and point of each Gospel story: his death, and his rising from death.

The bleeding and suffocating man nailed to a Roman scaffold was admitting another mind and purpose, allowing and facing another judgment of good and ill, to the end; confronting the ritual disobedience of Man with ritual obedience; offering himself, as the spectacle, of how God can deal with Man, and Man with God. After offering the bread and wine of the Passing meal as a memorial of the body and blood to be offered; falling in prayer, in the garden vigil, before the reality overtaking him; intoning, as he hung, fragments of the Psalms, the most moving human plaints to God expressive of the completest and most painful submission to him; he was able at the end to say, from them—

In your hands, Lord, I entrust my life
and, in another account—

It is done!

As the knees sagged and the head fell forward on his chest, the story ends: God's judgment is accepted, allowed and borne by this man; who, in taking and endorsing it, supporting, and *willing* it, gave God and Man a single victory over all ill.

For, with the hasty burial, a loving attempt after the Sabbath to finish the rites properly, led to the discovery: that he had risen. There were strange encounters with him, when they were not only unable to believe their eyes, but were at first, we are candidly told, unprepared and unable to see him. They were given *last* reassurances of his complete power, and the forgiveness that they could grant; and then saw the rising into the sky; where he is felt, until he comes again, hanging over us all.

The New Testament concludes with the Deeds of the apostles, the Spirit poured out on them to convert the world to a realization of what had happened; the Epistles, or letters, to the Churches, telling us again and again what the new faith and hope is; what the Church is, the body we share; telling of our freedom from Law, in subjection to Christ and to faith in him; in ways quite impossible to summarize or describe. There is, finally, the fantasia of Revelation, *Apocalypse*; a letter to seven Churches, or to all Churches, with the picture of the four creatures, the world; showing the Lamb opening the seven seals, or all secrets, which were seven armed men, or all plagues besetting mankind; the seventh secret being itself seven angels with trumpets, sounding the end of the world: a nightmare of dragons and monsters

and collapsing cities, which the suffering Lamb alone can overcome, with those who follow him.

We are back at the beginning; except that the world is being plagued, not Egypt; the Lamb is killed and eaten up for the journey, and yet not killed, but in triumph; the people are waiting, to be led to the promised land; yet they need only wait, for the promised land comes to them. To the travellers there forms the mirage, the New Jerusalem in the sky; not illusion, but pale reflection, of unseen reality. We are at the very beginning: the gates are opening, showing the way to the enclosure of Pleasure within, the water and the tree of Life. The snake of our knowledge is crushed; in the middle of the picture is enthroned the Lamb we sacrifice, promising to come and bring us there:

See, I come quickly!

And my reward to every man for his deeds . . .

Indeed, I come quickly!

Come, Lord Jesus!

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It is all very well, however, to look at the Bible in this way; but we must do more than glance at it, we must know it; and to know it we must read it, and make a practice of reading it. Regular readings in some form are quite necessary, we can see; which is one of the reasons for being obliged to attendance at Mass; the public part of it, like the daily Office of Religious, is simply a mosaic of Bible texts. Only in such public, 'periodic' presentation do the words rise to full significance and power. There is, also, in religious communities the additional practice of having a chapter a day read, at meals; and those fortunate enough to live in any community, of family, or work, or school, might arrange to read the Bible like this; choosing parts, at first. After the inevitable embarrassment, it could be a surprising success, and provide much-needed food for thought and argument. For single souls this will not be possible; but they might well learn from actors and actresses, who find it much easier to learn their long parts by reading them just before they go to sleep. Perhaps a few chapters in bed will help teach us our 'parts' in this more important drama.

That is the whole point; for the Bible, we are told, is an 'inspired' book; that is, a 'spirited' book: because what happens,

what is in this book, is 'spirited' out of the world, the world we know, or think we know; but 'spirited', too, because full of a spirit that will catch, and fill our lives. It is a life-time's interest really, a life; not another book, but *the* book; not just words, but *the* word, the first and last word; and the word, not about anything, or even everything, but about more than everything. It is the word of God.



THE SPIRIT AND THE BRIDE: II

St Luke's Witness to the Primitive Church

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THE claim of the sixteenth-century Reformers to return to the teaching of the primitive Church by the aid of the written Scriptures is still heard today, but not so often as formerly, because the spirit of liberal criticism has completely undermined that reverent confidence in the Word of God which was once so strong in the children of the Reformation. As *The Times* (London)¹ confessed not long ago, 'to the majority of Englishmen the open Bible is now a closed book. . . . The popular mind at present takes for granted that the Bible has been fatally discredited and that "nobody now believes that kind of thing"'. The Reformers have handed the Church (the writer means the non-Catholic churches, of course) today a problem which they could not have foreseen. Rejecting both the papal usurpation and the late-medieval abuses and corruptions, they sought to recover a "pure" Christianity. That meant for them a Scriptural Christianity. From that position there can be no retreat. On that the reformed Churches take their stand. One can hardly exaggerate the emphasis in the Anglican Prayer Book on Scripture as the final court of appeal. But who is to interpret the Scriptures and what is their title to authority?

The writer then proceeds to make an admission on his own behalf which reduces him to the situation of those who no longer read the Bible because they cannot trust it. 'The choice appeared

¹ 4 December, 1954, an article written by its religious correspondent.