

HYMN OF THE UNIVERSE by Teilhard de Chardin. Translated by Simon Bartholomew. *Collins, 18s.*

'Jesus is the Lord!' This was the early Christians' affirmation at once of their faith and their hope. Today we use indifferently the various names of Christ and so miss their significance. The Apostles and their first converts proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth died and that now he lives, marked out by his resurrection as the Son of God, the first born of those who will rise again from the dead, the Lord of Creation who will come again to claim his conquest and to proclaim his rule over the Universe. This, too, is our faith and our hope, in which we live that sacramental life which makes present again the saving events of his life and proclaims the consummation of all things in him.

Of *all* things. The ever present temptation for the Christian is to forget that the Incarnation of God's Word reveals to us that the transcendent God deliberately and uniquely involved himself with the stuff of his own created earth; that all creation, matter no less than spirit, is shot through with the saving and recreating power of the Presence of God. Reading Père Teilhard de Chardin one is unlikely to forget. 'Son of earth, steep yourself in the sea of matter, bathe in its fiery waters, for it is the source of your life and your youthfulness. You thought you could do without it . . . that you would be more divine if you lived in the world of pure thought . . . You were like to have perished from hunger. You must have oil for your limbs, blood for your veins, water for your soul, the world of reality for your intellect: do you not see that the very law of your own nature makes these a necessity for you?' (pp. 63–64). Some people are put off by the language he uses; it is not to their taste that faith should be expressed in terms of palaeontology and the evolution of the biosphere. Surely today we do not need to justify Teilhard's faith and if one finds his language uncongenial and unfamiliar it should be remembered that the only principle which could exclude Christ from the field of the positive scientist is the one which would exclude him from this world altogether. True, not all of us would sing easily Teilhard's Hymn to Matter.

'Blessed be you, harsh matter, barren soil, stubborn rock . . . you force us to work if we would eat. Blessed be you, perilous matter, violent sea, untameable passion; you who unless we fetter you will devour us. Blessed be you, mighty matter, irresistible march of evolution . . .' (p. 68). The rhythms are strange to our ears but the drama of which they are the libretto is the story of Creation whose mystery finds its meaning in the words, 'This is my Body', that Body from which stems the power to make all things new.

*Hymn of the Universe* is closer in style to *Le Milieu Divin* than to any of his previously published works. It is a collection containing the essay, 'The Mass on the World', two short stories which might more accurately be described as 'narrated contemplations', and an anthology of his insights drawn from his published and unpublished material, divided into four parts under the collective heading of 'Pensées'. Yet where *Le Milieu Divin* was an attempt to outline what might loosely be called a system, we have here a succession of flashing pictures, a kaleidoscopic vision of the life of the cosmic Christ worked out in the world of matter by that world's most powerful force, the free spirit of man in union with God.

From this vision is born that optimism, that hope, which despite all the sorrows and suffering, all the 'diminishments', is the birthright of the Christian. This is no facile millenarianism, no natural utopianism. It is a clear reminder to us that our faith and our Christian life are rooted in this world of matter and spirit which is the field of our work, our happiness and our fulfilment. In Christ all human goodness is holy, is creative, is divine. That is why all those who, from the widest stage of international politics to the uniqueness of a family, are striving to make better, materially or spiritually, the world they live in have a share in the work of the cosmic Christ building up a new heaven and a new earth. It is the vision of the Christian mystic of all ages and no less needed today – *Omnia in Christo cooperantur in bonum.*

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