

Editorial

At the focus of the liturgical year, this Easter as always, we are confronted with the polarity of death and resurrection, never perhaps so sharply expressed as in the two lines of that ancient hymn quoted in the epistle to the Philippians: 'He humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name'.

Christians have of course always accepted each half of the antithesis; history shows how difficult they have found it to keep a just balance between them. We are emerging now from a period in which we have concentrated attention on the first part, so that humanly speaking we are probably going to over-emphasise the second in the centuries to come. The consequences of these contrasted attitudes of faith are more complex than might at first sight appear, and worth exploring.

Until the other day it was the passion of Christ that we were asked to concentrate upon; we can still catch the echo of those thunderous sermons in which no detail of the torture was spared. With this rather sentimental attachment to our Lord's human life on earth went a corresponding neglect of his present human life with his Father: indeed that present life was thought of simply as the life of God, not as that of the mediator who places us with him as sons before our Father. So we found it difficult to think of ourselves as other than individuals helpless before the power and majesty of God, and there grew up a damaging tradition of spiritual life which reduced it to a mystical relationship between privileged people and their God. It was difficult to give a real assent to the idea of a community of Christ on this earth, so central in earlier ages of the Church. Ironically it was only by paying due attention to 'the things which are above', to the heavenly resurrection life of our Lord, that we learned to recover our sense of being members of an earthly community, made such by the liturgy, living the Holy Spirit's life in the service of our neighbour.

Concern with the resurrection has led us then to concentrate on the earthly, on the ordinariness of Christian life. We have discovered the way of salvation in making common cause with all men of goodwill, Christian or not, to comfort the sick, the needy, the oppressed. We have come to prefer the plain clothes of the work-bench to the

splendours of the neo-Gothic pro-Cathedral. All this is excellent in itself, and clearly represents the mind of the present Council and the recent popes. But equally clearly we could swing too far in reaction from our ideas of the recent past: we could come to see Christian life as confined to successful alleviation of human suffering. We have, as Catholics, come rather late to recognise the virtues of 'muscular Christianity'; we must try not to be overwhelmed by them.

If it was by turning to heaven that we learned the way back to earth, it may well be that by looking more carefully to the earth we can learn not to lose the way to heaven. Recall the antithesis of that Christian hymn: if we have renewed our faith in the resurrection, let us not forget that it was earned by obedience unto death. Our Lord's earthly life was one of surrender to his Father's will; as a result ours can be too. His obedience, his surrender, was for us to enter into and share, and we cannot call ourselves by his name until we have learned that we are not self-sufficient and must fail in our own works before our Lord can give us totally to God. In the Church's year the passion still comes before the resurrection: but every day we must be open to them both.