

militant atheism of Communists, but the practical atheism of us apathetic Catholics. The prophet was so full of hope because he was like a man who had been admitted into the counsels of God; his vision was enlarged and a glorious prospect revealed itself to the eye of his mind. It was a very different prospect from that imagined by many of his fellow Israelites. They were so full of their own importance in the eyes of God that they were persuaded the glorification of Israel was to be brought about by the destruction of the Gentile nations through the vengeance of Yahweh. But on the contrary, as Isaias makes so clear, 'the nations of the world (were neither) mere victims of the divine displeasure with their sin, nor mere blind instruments in the hands of Yahweh for the chastisement of his people; they (were) fully as human as Israel, with their age-long yearnings for truth and their need for just what Israel could give'. Israel was a nation chosen and called not to privilege but to responsibility; its task was to share with men what it had received.

Israel failed in its task through a mistaken sense of its own importance and the contemptuous pride that flows from such a mentality. But it is the sort of error that might easily be a common danger for us. Our threatened Christian civilisation will not be saved by the destruction of those who are seeking its downfall, but by more earnest efforts to share with them what we have received. The path is clearly marked out for us by the prophets.

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THE WORD IN ACTION

WHEN the Cistercians decided to establish themselves in the wilds of Yorkshire and set about cultivating the waste land at 'Fountains', building their cells, offices and Abbey Church, the outward sign of their faith was in Labour, and hard at that. The uncultured country men of the neighbourhood were soon drawn into this great activity; not only stonemasons and tillers of the soil but tradesmen of all kinds gravitated to the site, caught up in the exuberance of those who were setting up a home they purposed to share with Almighty God. It followed that in the course of two or three generations the buildings were finished, the pictures of adornment painted, the images of veneration carved and on their pedestals, the vestments woven—and an understanding of Peace born in the midst of this now large community so that even the young men, whose great grandfathers and great great uncles

had begun the work in a previous century, began to realise why God had rested on the seventh day in the Creation of the world. The stones continued to cry out, the statues and capitals to shine their benediction, the choir to echo with the prayer and praise of the Religious, but the sense of urgency and achievement was no longer reflected in the lives of the people as when the great stones were being quarried and carted, shaped and lifted into their appointed places for him who was to be their daily bread for ever and ever. Amen.

We tend to forget that though God rested on the seventh day the cycle of renewal began upon the morrow, that his image is a living image, his pictures moving pictures and the Mass itself a daily evidence of that renewal, of the Word not in repose but action.

I was thinking on these lines last year outside Salamanca cathedral when a huge Calvary slowly moved out of the great doors to take its place in a Holy Week procession through the streets. The 'sculptures', more than twice life-size, made out of papier maché, fixed to a platform borne on the heads of a company of men well disciplined to the weight and slow step involved in the carrying of it. The vibrating figures of the Crucified and the Virgin at his feet, the natural sway caused by its passage over the fall and rise of an uneven road, the observant crowds kneeling as it passed, gave the impression of a ship riding through a sea of humanity; a 'Way of the Cross' more vivid than any of the carved or painted panels in our churches where the 'Stations' are indeed stationary, often with the inertia of dust. The people filling market place, window and balcony were, if only for a moment or two, ranked in Golgotha.

All over Spain such pageants and processions were on the move, and it was impossible not to reflect upon the absence of anything similar in England. In Lent, Good Friday alone is honoured publicly in that there are no daily papers on bookstall or breakfast table—but I cannot forget an old County Council school teacher who said that 'not 10 per cent' of his pupils knew the origin or meaning of the 'good'. At Whitsuntide, when 'all our pageants of delight' were once celebrated everywhere, especially in the cities, by the Trade Guilds, we have now only conferences and political rallies with many words but no action beyond the more popular cricket pitches.

Religious procession in such an atmosphere of indifference would be out of place; the Christian faith is little more than a memory among 90 per cent of the population; but it is a memory, and clearly less despised than soporific. I was struck, for instance, by the attitude of those taking refuge in Liverpool Street Underground

during the blitz while a group of Catholics was miming 'The Stations of the Cross'. There was evidently an awareness among the shelterers of that Great Event. The crucifixion had not been, I felt, linked in their minds to any time or place and, perhaps, did not mean more to most present than to one old woman whom I overheard speaking to a neighbour as she climbed into her bunk afterwards: 'I always did think there was something to be said for Jesus'. A slender link indeed, but such vague knowledge is probably more open to the appeal of action than to a reasoned sermon on the catechism.

The mind of that old woman represents the minds of many millions to whom the word has still to be preached; and it is to be noted that the appeal of movement and spectacle is a form of preaching. As David once danced before the Ark so has The Grail and the J.O.C. virtually danced before the altar, reminding men of the freedom of praise enjoyed a thousand years ago when the Easter trope 'Quem quaeritis' illustrated and illuminated a passage of the Mass. Titles like 'Catholic Action', 'The Sword of the Spirit', 'Youth Movement', indicate the mind of the Church; and seeing the danger of absorption in what may become merely a kind of Activism the Holy Father wants us to harness such doings to the Liturgy.

It is for this reason that I quote the following illustrations of one liturgical drama in which I have some experience. In 1933 the young men and boys who served as acolytes acted the Stations of the Cross before the high altar of the Cathedral of St Paul, Minnesota. A note from one present describes the effect:

The thousands who saw for the first time the 'Stations' acted by the servers in their albs and cottas last Friday evening had not been warned of this addition to the Lenten service; our surprise lasted perhaps half a minute, by that time we were all absorbed as though we had been transported to Calvary itself . . . not until afterwards did I realise that only choir vestments had been used. It is interesting to read a report of the same 'Stations' similarly mimed in a Mission in N. Rhodesia on Good Friday last, telling of its effect on the crowd who came to see it, and concluding:

The reactions of the villagers and of the boys (I made them write essays on it) seem to warrant an extension of the mime technique to other incidents in the life of Our Lord. A team of a dozen boys could tour the out-schools with a vernacular-speaking priest to act as a sort of compère. The boys are thoroughly keen. These widely differing experiences may be concluded with another from a Welsh village carried out by the Parish Priest:

I suggested that they might do the mime, 'to show the people'

what our Lord's Passion might mean to them, not as a remote thing, but as a mystery in which they (with the mimers) were incorporated. None of the youth had any experience of acting, still less of miming. The 'cast' therefore was equal in inexperience and—at first—in embarrassment. It had to be 'mixed' because of a shortage of numbers. Five farm lads did our Lord, Simon, Pilate, John and Centurion. A plasterer did Joseph of Arimathea, a German prisoner of war did the first soldier, a girl from the village did our Lady, farmers' daughters and girls in service did the other women's parts. Three younger children at the (Catholic) elementary school made up the rest of the crowd.

First we intended to do the mime in the Hall, with a wonderful Tudor oak screen for the background. But such an interest grew up—and so many people wanted to come, that we transferred to the church. The cast were nervous about this and at the first rehearsal in the church were shy and hesitant. On the evening I put a screen before the altar, I removed the Blessed Sacrament to a second altar in the apse and, having removed some benches, arranged the 'stage' immediately before the communion rails. After Benediction I preached about the Passion and explained about the mime. The mime began with the players coming down from the gallery and through the chapel singing the Litany. The men were all dressed in albs and amices, our Lord wearing also a purple stole and a black cloak. The women were in dust-sheets made (by pinning) into loose, *un-realistic* robes. The soldiers wore black cassocks. I remained in the gallery and read the stations from there (i.e. out of sight), prefacing them with a reading from Philipp. 2, vv. 5-11, and before each station adding a short reading from the prophets (e.g. for 6th Station, Is. 53, 3; for 7th, Lam. 5, 15). The organist (a farmer's wife) played during the mirroring—Bach Chorales, and especially *Mortify us by thy grace* and *Sheep may safely graze*. I followed in the main the directions of the Mime book but with a certain amount of simplification—because of small space. The congregation joined in (i.e. answered the 'We adore thee' and *Our Father*, etc., after each station). We did not sing the *Stabat Mater* but sang two verses of *O Sacred Head* before the Stations, and the rest at the very end. Finally I read Coloss. 1, vv. 16-23, and said the usual prayers 'for the Pope's intentions'.

The reactions were unanimous and enormously enthusiastic. From my point of view the great thing was to give my 'youth' confidence, a sense of adult responsibility in worship. It was a revelation. The boy (17) who acted our Lord was wholly unself-conscious, dignified (his dying on the cross was beautifully timed, his fall done so imperceptibly that it seemed one movement). Of course a vast amount of work was required in preparation, especially with the Christ. But it was triumphantly worth while.

By the way, I differed in one detail. At the end our Lord remained kneeling before the Cross until the rest had disappeared (the way they came) singing the Litany. He then rose and walked out another way, i.e. through the sanctuary. It was impossible for him to 'mingle', and I think this gave a resurrection to the mime! Several people were struck by this, and said they thought it an admirable *finis*. Certainly the congregation was deeply moved.

It was a most valuable experience for me, and I was grateful to the book, with its exceedingly clear instructions. After the performance we were asked to repeat it in another parish. This we refused to do on the ground that they should do it themselves there, and we were not a company of actors but a Christian congregation having an evening service! Next year (and I hope this will be an annual thing) I am going to have the mime on Good Friday afternoon, in lieu of the usual 3 p.m. service.

For wholly untrained, unsophisticated country folk (who were at first reluctant but agreed because they seem to think it is a good idea to help me!) mime is much more valuable as *a means of instruction* than when it becomes a more technically competent piece of gesturing. I am sure our mime had lots of defects but they did not matter in the slightest because the one thing necessary was there—a sincerity that was communicated to everyone present.

An essential character of religious drama is that it must be strictly conventional; the conventions used must be constant, of such a nature that they may be within the capacities of ordinary people both to understand and perform, and the actor must not forget that there are few more mirth-provoking pitfalls than those offered him by the dignified! A crown, mitre or a bowler hat worn at the wrong angle, however unintentionally, may be as fatal to solemnity as a banana peel! Technical competence is the best insurance against nervousness.

There are few limits to the subjects which may be treated in this way—The Seven Sacraments, The Rosary, The Oxford Movement (an account of which appeared in *BLACKFRIARS* over 10 years ago), the story of Jacob and Esau (televised in 1938) indicate their range; but, for the majority of Parish groups, the wise course is to be content with incidents from the Bible and the lives of the Saints, especially of the patron of the Parish. Thus may the faithfulness of the few be re-lived in action for the inspiration of the many, and the eyes opened that the ears may be unstopped.

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