

cussion in theological matters is the surest protection of truth, and that only in this way can justice be done to the universality of sin and of fallible human creatureliness. But we believe also that we can know and recognize God's word by faith in and through his Church, and when that is known and recognized to reject it is the sin of disobedience to the known truth, a sin against the majesty of God. We can and should carry out at all times without fear the ideals of scholarship we have spoken of, in the confidence that revealed truth, which is faith-knowledge, and the truths of reason and critical research both have God for their source.

A thorough understanding of the Catholic view in these matters, coupled, on the Catholic side, with a sympathetic knowledge of non-Catholic thinking is the surest way to the unity in faith for which we all pray.

## Myth, Symbol and Revelation

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It may be helpful to approach the subject of the place of symbols in Christianity from the consideration of two sets of difficulties or disabilities which seem to affect many Catholics nowadays in the western world.

First, Catholics are often accused of not reading the Old Testament. If this is true, and by and large it seems to be, it is important for us to discover why it is so; and the likely explanation seems to be that to a great extent we have lost the clue to the reading of the book, we have forgotten the 'language', the idiom, in which it is written. Again it seems undeniably true to say that the modern Catholic, however deep and vivid his belief in the efficacy of the sacraments, often finds little meaning if any in their ritual, the ritual for instance of the baptismal waters; whereas it is clear that in the days of primitive Christianity this same ritual had on the neophyte an immensely vivid impact.

Secondly, many Catholics nowadays seem to feel that the formulas, the propositions, in which the Christian faith is stated and propounded

to them in creed or catechism have about them a certain unreality: they seem so dry, so technical, so remote from ordinary everyday speech and everyday reality, that they may easily come in the end to seem meaningless: the dogmatic formulas, the definitions of faith, so remote and so dry as to be unreal; the moral principles, so neat and tidy as to seem lacking in validity.

Now these two sets of facts may at first sight seem contradictory; but in reality they are complementary.

To say that we have forgotten the 'language' of the Old Testament means that we tend to approach the Old Testament as though it were a history textbook written in the idiom of the twentieth century, the idiom of the modern scientific historian. But it is not. Whether we like it or not, the fact is that God wrote his book in the language not of scientific prose but of poetry, the language not of formulas but of pictures or images; if we lose the clue to those pictures we lose the clue to the book; and this is what does in fact seem to have happened. The same is true of our approach to the Church's sacramental ritual, which again is a question of communicating truth and reality to us not only through formulas but through pictures: the picture, for instance, of life found through death, through a going down into the waters of darkness. And it seems at least likely that our feeling of unreality when confronted with the precise formulations of Christian doctrine in creed or catechism or theological textbook is partly to be explained by this same loss of the other language, the complementary language of Bible and ritual, the language of poetry.

It is necessary to stress this idea of the two different languages being in fact complementary. The Church tries to teach us, to communicate reality to us, simultaneously in the two ways, through the two different kinds of language; and each way, each language, is essential to us. Without the 'prose' we should easily fall a prey, as the history of mysticism or religious enthusiasm makes clear to us, to all sorts of doctrinal vagaries, perhaps to some form of pseudo-mysticism. But without the 'poetry', the doctrinal formulas do of their very nature tend to seem abstract, arid and therefore unreal; and nowadays there is precisely a danger that these formulations may seem to the Catholic to be all that God, that Christ, that the Church, have so to speak to offer us, and that they are in themselves the objects of religious faith. Sometimes it has to be pointed out that we do not believe in a creed: we believe through a creed. The fact is that we cannot express the Inexpressible in concepts, in words; we cannot confine the Infinite Unknowable in concepts or

in words. Formulas are an essential guide; but sooner or later we find ourselves brought up short against a wall of mystery. Beyond this wall we cannot be led by the language of theological or doctrinal formulas; but we can sometimes be led further in another way, the way of non-conceptual awareness or apprehension, the way not of prose but of poetry, of picture-language. And it is this language that is used for the most part in the Bible, and by Christ in his teaching, and by the Church in its sacramental ritual.

It must be stressed at once that to speak of 'poetic' language in this context does not imply anything abstruse or highly intellectualized; on the contrary, it means something simple. This is the language, these are the pictures, used for example by Christ in his parables, those simple stories which can be understood by any human being of any age or race. This is the language, these are the simplicities, of folklore, of fairy tales, even of the humble nursery rhyme, as well as of the mighty visions of the greatest poets and artists. But how does this language take us further than the language of prose?

First let us distinguish three different things. There is the conventional sign, such as the signs used in algebra, or the road signs with which we are all familiar; these are not 'signs' at all in the sense in which the word is used, in the Fourth Gospel, of the miracles of our Lord; they are simply pointers, decided upon by convention, to some utilitarian end. Secondly, there are the individual symbols, images, metaphors, which are so to speak invented and utilized by this or that individual poet in order to communicate his vision: these are of their nature, being personal and invented, limited in scope, and may well be obscure to a reader unacquainted with the individual poet's background or world of thought. Thirdly, there are symbols which are universal, the heritage of humanity as a whole; these are the images through which, as Kerenyi says, 'the world speaks'. These are the images which are to be found throughout all human history, in all ages, among all peoples, such images as water, tree, fire, wine, oil, rebirth, and the story of the hero and his dark journey.

It is with this third type of image, the universal symbols, that we are concerned here. These, which are the heritage of humanity, lie very deep in human nature. The individual, invented symbol can contain and therefore communicate only what the inventor puts into it; the universal and so to speak 'innate' symbol has a vastly greater content than that of any individual conscious mind, and indeed contains elements for which no verbal expression would seem to exist. These are

not just illustrations of some proposition, used to make the proposition intellectually clearer, as is the case when we make use of similes. These are of themselves the vehicle of communication, and the communication is a deep one, first because the images do communicate a reality for which no words, no concepts are adequate; secondly because they are of their nature ambivalent, they are paradox, as the teaching and imagery of Christ in the Gospels is paradox; thirdly because, being the language of poetry, they appeal not just to the head but to the heart: more accurately their appeal is to the whole of man's psyche and indeed the whole of man's personality. Once one has grasped the clue to them, once one has relearned the idiom in which they are stated, they can never seem arid and unreal as can formulations of doctrine: they are immensely real because like life itself they are untidy, they have in them the untidiness and the richness of paradox. More than that, appealing as they do to the whole personality, and not only appealing but also healing precisely because of their total appeal, they at the same time evoke a total response. We are perhaps too accustomed to thinking of faith in terms of an intellectual assent to propositions, from which it is an easy step to thinking of faith as belief in rather than through a creed; the communication of divine reality through this image-language evokes quite a different response: a total personal commitment, the kind of response which is envisaged by St John in the Fourth Gospel when he speaks of faith as the one 'work' which God demands of us.

Now these universal symbols or pictures are elements in a universal story-picture: a story which, always substantially the same, appears in endless variety of detail in the different ages and races of mankind. This is the story which provides the background to our Lord's mysterious words to Nicodemus, the words concerning death and rebirth. It tells of the hero who must leave behind him his home, must sacrifice rest and security, and go forth adventuring, embark on an arduous and perilous journey, go down into darkness, often into the dark waters of the sea or deep caverns beneath the sea, and there meet and battle with an adversary—a dragon, a wild beast, an evil king—and often endure death at the end of his *agon*, his struggle, so as to win for himself a new life, a life which he is then empowered to take back, as the boon or treasure he has won, to his people.

This journey from death to life, from dark to light, is to be found everywhere, it is, we might say, the pattern of reality as a whole as we know it. We find it in Nature: every day the sun-god dies in the evening, goes back to his ocean-mother, goes back to the dark womb of the

sea, in order to be born anew next day at dawn; every year after the high summer is over, the year falls and in winter dies, to be born again in the following spring. In human mythology, art, poetry, folklore, fairytale, in ballads and nursery rhymes, in fiction and fantasy, and last but not least in dreams, this same pattern and these same images are to be found; they are to be found in the stories with which the Old Testament is full: the stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, David and a host of others; then in the New Testament the same pattern, the same story, the same symbols, are lived out in the life and death and rising again of our Lord, and stated again and again in his teaching; and then finally, deriving from that life and that teaching, the same pattern is found in the daily life of the Church, in its sacramental ritual, its daily bringing of life to humanity.

Here we must pause to dispose of a common but needless and indeed dangerous timidity which Catholics sometimes feel when mythology is mentioned in the same breath as Christian reality. If we couple pagan myth and Christian mystery together are we not making the latter as 'unreal' as the former? No: myth is defined simply as a 'sacred iconograph', that is to say, an image communicating sacred or religious reality. Inasmuch as the communicating of truth is concerned, it makes no difference whether the image is taken from what we would normally call real history or from some purely fictional story: the lesson, the communication, remains the same. In the Old Testament, for example, it makes no difference to the vividness or the validity of the lesson of *Job* or *Tobias* whether these men are historical figures or imaginative creations. In the Gospel the same is true of, say, the prodigal son or the pharisee and the publican in the temple. But the story of the life and death and rising again of Christ is an entirely different matter: this is inescapably *history*, the events described for us are historical happenings brought about by the emotions and passions of human agents on certain definite dates and in certain definite places; and because the events described concern the Christ who is God-made-man, God himself entering into the historical, the cosmological, process, their historicity is indeed essential. But that historicity is in fact as obvious and inescapable in the case of the Christ-story as is the fantasy-character of the pagan-mythological statements of the same theme.

Nevertheless in all cases the theme does state the same essential facts about human nature. In pagan mythology we are shown man's yearnings for life; in the Old Testament stories we are shown more than that, we are shown not merely yearnings but hopes, hopes based on

definite God-given promises; in the New Testament we are shown the fulfilment of those hopes (and *a fortiori* the fulfilment of all the yearnings of humanity) in the life-history of the God-man who, unlike the heroes of the myths, lived out the pattern himself in brute fact in his own life, in order that we in our turn might then be empowered to live out the same pattern in our different ways ourselves. Hence it is that the sacraments represent the same pattern, the same theme of life through death and light through darkness, the same baptismal theme of rebirth or renewal; and in so doing apply, effectively, Christ's living-out of the pattern to ourselves, to our own lives. The Christ-life ends not on Calvary or in the tomb or even in the moment of rising into new life or ascending into glory, but only at the moment of Whitsuntide, the coming to humanity of that boon of life, the holy Spirit, which is the direct result of all that Christ had lived and experienced and done. And the sacraments are simply the ways in which that boon of life is now brought to us daily, over and over again, through the instrumentality of the Church.

If then we find the Old Testament boring, the sacramental rituals unintelligible, it is because we have so largely forgotten this language in which they speak to us; but we have forgotten the language because the world we live in has long been accustomed to think no communication valid unless it is couched in the language of reason, of science: it is a world whose heritage is the impoverished aftermath of rationalism, empiricism and *scientisme*. But now at last we are belatedly coming to realize that just as we cannot escape from non-conceptual thought, from the language of symbol—for if we attempt to repudiate it in our conscious thinking, our waking moments, it returns to us in the field of imagination and fantasy, or in the life of dreams—so also we cannot afford to despise it or attempt to exclude it from our psychic lives, for without it we are doomed to remain incomplete, unintegrated, unbalanced, neurotic. And as modern western man must recover the world of symbol in general if he is to recover his sanity and the fullness of his psychic life, so the Christian must recover the world of symbol if he is to acquire a fuller and more vital awareness of the meaning of Christian truth, of God's self-revelation. Therefore it is a matter of the utmost urgency for us to become familiar once again with the great universal symbols—the water, the wood, the fire, the wine, the oil, the tree—and to see these once again as elements in the basic and universal story-symbol of rebirth, the paradox-theme of life won through death, joy through sorrow, strength through weakness, greatness through

nothingness, light through darkness, wisdom through a childlike *docta ignorantia*, and eternal youth, freedom, vitality and gaiety through the humble acceptance of our temporal disabilities, our disintegrated state, the shackles and enfeebling frailties and fatigues and pains which are sin's legacy.

These we must learn and assimilate from the stories and histories of the Bible, that 'theme-with-variations' given us by God himself; in particular and above all we must see them fully and finally lived out in actual fact in the Christ-life, and thence coming to us here and now, in the representation of that Christ-life, through the Church's sacramental system. To do that is to find Bible and ritual alike springing to life; it is to find in Bible and ritual alike the thrill and excitement of a fresh discovery: for all those details in the Old Testament stories which historically speaking are insignificant and therefore boring now thrill and throb with life since we see them not just as historical fact but as picture, as symbol, as elements in this constantly stated and restated life-pattern; and the pattern becomes thrilling for us because, being the universal life-pattern, it reveals itself to *me* as the pattern of—and the clue to—*my* life, my struggles, my *agon*, my joys and sorrows, my problems, my distresses, my quest for God, my glimpses of God, my journey to God.

But then there is the further thrill of finding this same pattern repeated everywhere: a thrill which perhaps in some way resembles the vital experience of the saints in their awareness of God's omnipresence, finding all things in God and God in all things: for this new discovery means finding the pattern of the baptismal rebirth, the pattern of the quest for life through death, endlessly stated and re-stated in the world's art and literature and story and fantasy and dream. To modern man the ritual of baptism or of the Mass might seem strange indeed, the unintelligible language of a strange sect, and the statement of its truths in theological formulas might equally well seem unreal and fantastic; but how can this be so when the same truths are stated in and through the same symbols, the same pictures, by humanity as a whole, whether in the sometimes dim, sometimes distorted, adumbrations of paganism or in the pre-figurings of the Old Testament?

This is indeed one of the chief ways in which pagan myth and ritual are of importance to us: that they show us the *universality* of the truths and facts of which the Bible and Christian ritual speak to us; they show us the *naturalness* and humanness of the Christian supernatural ideals of holiness; they show us that 'the world' does indeed speak through these

Christian symbols, but that now, since the symbols communicate not merely an imagined myth-pattern but an historically lived-out theandric experience and activity, they voice not just a vague yearning, or even a far-distant hope, but the humble yet exultant conviction of fulfilment, a fulfilment given to us and realized in us by God through his Christ.

But there is a second way in which these non-scriptural parallels are of importance to us; they can revitalize Christian images which, known to us perhaps from early childhood, have become too familiar and have therefore lost something of their meaning or at least of their vividness. We can find new light for our understanding of Genesis, for instance, if we study the Babylonian creation-myth; we can gain new insight into the Christian allusions to Christ as Sun or as Fire if we know something of the pagan poetry of sun-worship from ancient Egypt and elsewhere; we can find new meaning in the story of Noah and the whale if we compare it with its many extra-biblical parallels; and in general we can better understand the dark journey which is the pattern for each one of us if we add to its many biblical presentations those other presentations of it that we find in myth and poetry and folklore and in the rituals of other religions.

The formulations of Christian truth, whether in the doctrinal phrases of creed and catechism or in the statement of moral principles, can seem unreal because too neat, too tidy: but if we see these in the light of their presentation in symbol-form in the stories of the Bible and the parables and teaching of Christ we shall no longer think of them as too neat and tidy. Theologically speaking, for instance, God must be said to have created man and the universe out of nothing; but this is not the picture with which Genesis presents us: all life springs from duality or polarity, from the 'conjunction of opposites', and in Genesis it is with this polarity that we are presented: in the beginning there are on the one hand the dark waters of chaos, formless, lifeless, sterile, and on the other hand, brooding over them, there is the life-giving Spirit, the wind, the creative life-breath; and the process of creation is described for us in terms of a cleaving or cutting of the waters, the wind driving down upon them and cutting them as with a sword, so that thereafter there are the waters of the heavens above and the waters of the seas below, and always it is from the meeting of the waters, the marriage of heaven and earth, that life springs: as when the waters above, which are both gentle dew and fiercely driving rain, fall from heaven and bedew the soil and cause it to spring, as *Isaiahs* shows us, so that there is seed for the sower



and bread for the eater; it is always thus that out of chaos God creates life and order and beauty, as out of the primordial chaos he fashioned the paradise-garden.

In the same way it was out of the formless, inert, lifeless slime of the earth that man was first fashioned by God's hand; but he too, if he is to have the fullness of life, must always look up to the heavens, to God, he must be willing to *receive* life as a boon, a gift, not clutch at it as something he himself can achieve. It was in this that Adam failed, and for this that he fell away from God and life: trying to reach up to heaven 'as of himself,' trying to be himself as God, he fell back into chaos: the garden lost to him, his God-given dominion over Nature and the animals lost to him, he himself sank back into the slime, but a slime now, not simply of promise and potentiality as in the beginning, but of disorder and disintegration.

Yet this is not the end of the story: the renewal, the rebirth, the fresh start, is promised him *provided* he decides to look up to heaven in humility and eagerness, accepting the ugly fact of his disintegrated condition, and begging to receive the gift of healing and renewal from above. But the Genesis story goes on to show us how the proud sin of the first man, his attempt to seize upon divine life for himself, is repeated in social form in the story of Babel: human society's arrogant attempt to build a great tower, a *ziggurat*, which should reach up to heaven—an attempt which inevitably leads therefore, like Adam's sin, to another disintegration, the disintegration of a society whose members find they can no longer talk the same language. And again God's mercy grants a fresh beginning: life emerges anew from the dark meeting of the waters from above and from below; the life-bringing sun shines through the rain and the renewal is guaranteed and ratified by the 'bow in the clouds,' and from the perils of the dark sea-journey we pass to the story of Noah's discovery of the wine which 'rejoices the heart of man'.

But while the repudiation of the pride and egoism of the first sin, and of all subsequent sin, always means being humble enough to be receptive, it never means being merely passive: it means, not that there is no dark journey to be undertaken, but that we must look to heaven for the power to undertake the journey successfully. It is this humble, brave and virile undertaking of the journey that we find again and again in the Bible stories, the young hero going forth from his home and setting out on his quest, as when the boy David rides out to do battle with the giant, or Jacob sets out to do battle for the attainment

of his own integrity, till, in the final fulfilment of all these partial patterns, the boy Christ leaves his childhood-home and background to do battle for all humanity through his passion and death.

An Orphic poem speaks of night as *πάντων γένεσις*, the birth of all things: when we think of the innumerable ways in which, from life and literature and art alike, we learn how life does in fact spring out of darkness and chaos and what seems like the negation of life, we begin to realize that the waters of baptism in the sacramental ritual, far from being the unintelligible words of an unknown tongue, are our own idiom, our human heritage.

The youthful joy and zest and freedom of the original garden are irretrievably lost to us, but when words like those of the poet Hölderlin, 'all hope lies in youth regained', have evoked an echo from deep within us, we are not surprised to find St Thomas describing the happiness of the ultimate paradise of heaven in terms of youth and freedom.

And when we find the energy and vitality needed for the dark journey described for us in myth and poem in terms of energizing wind or life-giving fire, we are prepared for a similar picture in the story of the first Pentecost: we are prepared for a deeper apprehension of Christ as the *Sol salutis*, the 'Sun of righteousness with healing in his wings'. When D. H. Lawrence speaks of the sun as the great golden purring lion, the phrase has special meaning for us as we think of the Lion of Judah, and of the ambivalence of that Lion's love, the eternal love which is at once fierce and tender. The Old Testament descriptions of God's presence revealed through the might of thunder and storm and wind take on new meaning for us when we compare them with the descriptions in Aeschylus of the Promethean defiance of the thunderbolts and lightnings of Zeus, or with Milton's haunting description of the defeated Satan, whose face 'deep scars of thunder had entrenched'. The strong hope and vigorous wine-inspired joy which give to the Christian journey its zest and its gaiety seem all the stronger when we compare them with the gray twilight sadness of Virgil's lovely line, '*ibant obscuri sola sub nocte per umbram*'; and the image of creation emerging from the chaos-waters and the lifeless slime will be the more real to us if we have compared it with Coleridge's picture of the ship lying helpless in the stagnant sea, those 'pestful calms' filled only with 'slimy shapes' and 'miscreated life' which yet bear within them the germs of a new life and do in fact spring to life when the mariner learns to accept and love the slime and the miscreate squalor just as man must learn to accept and love the squalor of his own fallen estate if he is to be trans-

formed and made whole. Again the driving down of the creative wind in Genesis is the more vivid to us when we compare it with Coleridge's 'slant night-shower, driving loud and fast', which seems almost like an echo of the Septuagint's use of the verb ἐπιφέρομαι—the spirit-wind driving down athwart the dark waters.

The story of Lot's wife turning back from the journey, looking back to the security of the home she has left and so, by her gesture of life-refusal, being immobilized, made lifeless and sterile, becomes more vivid for us when we compare it for instance with its Greek parallel, the story of Daphne fleeing from Phoebus Apollo, the life-bringing sun-god, and so forfeiting her life and being turned into a tree.

The prophet Isaias' description of God's word, quoted above, as being like the rain and snow that fall from heaven and bedew the soil and cause the earth to spring, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater: this picture in its turn becomes more vivid for us if we contrast it with the Catalonian legend<sup>1</sup> of the little Tom Thumb personage who, hiding in the belly of an ox, called back to his parents who were searching for him: 'I am in the belly of the ox, where it does not rain and it does not snow': for the return to the womb-chaos to find *renewal* of life is made the more vivid for us if we contrast it with a retreat into the womb in order to *escape* from life. Another contrast to this Catalonian legend is the account of Jonah's creative sojourn in the belly of the whale; and this in its turn is made more meaningful for us when we compare it with other, non-biblical, versions of the same story, many of which contain the important additional symbol of the fire within the whale's belly, as in the now well-known story of Pinocchio, the little puppet who, as the result of his adventures, is transformed into a human boy.

From the dark waters all life begins; the waters are stirred to life by the creative wind and energized by the creative fire of the sun, and then the journey can begin. So it was that after the coming of the pentecostal wind and fire the journey of the Christian Church could begin; and so each Christian is empowered by the Spirit to embark on his journey. But if the journey is to be completed we need the strengthening of food, as Elias needed the bread to enable him to complete his forty days' journey and come to the mountain of God; and so Bread and Wine are given us through the mystery of the Mass, the Bread giving us strength, the Wine rejoicing our hearts, giving us that joy which must characterize the Christian journey despite life's sorrows, for the eternal life of which

<sup>1</sup>Recounted by Salvador Dali in his autobiography.

St John's Gospel so constantly tells us, and which is eternal joy, is not just a life to which Christ's faithful followers are to look forward but a life which at least in germ is theirs here and now to enjoy.

If then we learn to see the details in the biblical narratives not merely as historical details but as symbols, we shall no longer be able to think of them as insignificant. In a poem it is precisely the details, the individual words, which are significant since it is they which evoke the impressions and thus make the communication which the poet wishes to give us; and the Bible is a poem.

In the story of Jacob's quest for his own integration we are told that he came to a place called Luz, and this detail is not boring but significant if we realize that the name means *separation*, for he must first cut himself off from home and security if he is to find life and strength. And the acquisition of strength is pictured for us in its various stages: first the physical strength, the tough qualities which had hitherto been those of his brother Esau, in the story of how he lifted unaided the great stone which covered the mouth of the well in the field where he met Rachel; and then the moral strength with which he waited and labored seven years in order to win Rachel, and found the seven years were 'but as a day because of the greatness of his love'.

Nor are we surprised, we are thrilled, to find Jacob's Well mentioned again in the New Testament, in the story of Christ's meeting with the Samaritan woman; for it was beside the Well that he sat down wearied to rest; and, as Augustine tells us, *Tibi fatigatus est*, he was wearied for us, the self-imposed weariness of God giving renewal of strength to weary humanity.

It will make sense to us now when we are told that in a liturgically built church the altar is at the eastern end; for as first we climb up the steps—climb Abraham's Mount of Vision, Elias' Mountain of God—and then enter the church and turn our eyes to the altar, it is to the *Sol oriens*, the rising Sun, that we look for the life and strength that come to us through the Mass. Then, when the Mass is over, we turn like Columbus towards the west to start the day's journey; that everyday life in the world which can—and for the Christian must—be so meaningful since it is to be part of the total redemptive process of the Christ-life on earth. Nor are we surprised to find that in the Mass the Gospel is sung or said facing the north, since myth and Bible alike accustom us to associate the north with terror, danger, destruction, evil, and the Gospel is the living Word of God in our midst defying and expelling the power of evil, as in the baptismal ritual the Church calls on the

divine Spirit to expel and exclude the Satanic power from the Christian soul.

Again, it will not seem irrelevant or insignificant, still less frivolous, that when the prophet Eliseus raises the dead boy to life by breathing into his mouth, the story ends with the boy sneezing (or in another version sighing) seven times; for seven signifies completeness, and the expulsion of breath is an image of the repossession of life: life is now restored to the boy in its fullness, as in another context life is restored in its fullness through the baptismal rebirth or through the sacrament of penitence and sorrow.

The dark journey is often depicted as a going down into the waters of the sea, but sometimes also as a descent into a cave; and the cave itself may be very great, like the 'caverns measureless to man' of the poet, but it has a tiny entry through which the neophyte must crawl; and so we are prepared, on the one hand, to hear the Magdalenian cave-paintings described as being of religious significance, and on the other hand to find that the birth of Christ and the visit of the Wise Men are traditionally portrayed as taking place in a cave, or that in the story of Christ's resurrection the apostles and Mary are described as having to bend down in order to look into the cave-tomb.

Still less shall we be surprised to find all the great universal symbols gathered up and lived out in the life and passion of the Word made flesh: the birth in the dark cave, the Magi, the separation-story that we usually call 'the finding in the temple' (for losing-and-finding is one of the variants of the death-life theme), the baptism in the waters of Jordan (and the ancient representation of that scene with the Tree of Life standing in the midst of the river, the Cross giving life to the waters), and then the going out alone into the desert led by the Spirit-wind, to begin the long struggle for life, for our life, that long dark journey the climax of which begins, in John's account of it, with the words 'and it was night'.

It was night, it was darkness, when Christ left the supper-room to embark upon his final *agon* in the garden of Gethsemane; and the name is rich in meaning for us since it signifies an oil-press: the strengthening oil with which of old the Greek youths anointed themselves before their wrestling-matches, and the oil-press in which the life-giving oil is won through stress and the crushing impact of death.

It is John the symbol-lover who speaks of Gethsemane as a garden, not simply a 'plot of land': and thus the story of mankind is described for us in terms of the three different gardens: of Eden, lost to us forever;

of heaven, promised to those who complete their journey through death to life in the power of Christ; and between them this mid-point of history, the garden of that Christ-struggle which, leading through death to resurrection and glory and pentecostal fire, was undertaken by the Word precisely in order to make the eternal garden possible for us again. And it is this aspect of the second garden which explains why so many events in the Passion story are as it were an agonized travesty of lovely or joyous or tender elements in our human experience.

Christ is kissed, but it is the kiss of betrayal; he is naked, but his is not the joyous nakedness of paradise, it is the brutal stripping which precedes the flogging and the mockery, a stripping which moreover means the utter poverty of a total surrender to God's will. In mythology, the hero who has fought and slain a wild beast drags it to a cave and clothes himself in its pelt that he may be indued with the animal's vitality and vigor; in the passion, Christ must drag to Calvary not a slain animal but the instrument of his own slaying, for it is not he who will be indued with strength from another but we who are to be indued with his strength, the strength of the divine Victim. He is crowned in mockery that he may be crowned in his glory: when his body is pierced with the lance—and lance, sword, arrow are sun-symbols, cleaving (destroying) in order to bring forth life, as in the creative cleaving of the waters in Genesis—his flesh is cleaved that ours, our human nature, may be made whole. And when his dead body lies in the darkness of the cave-tomb and he makes his final dark journey, that underworld journey which we call the descent into hell, this is for us the final moment of darkness before the new day which is to dawn for us, the final theandric redemptive act before that glory of resurrection and ascension which immediately prepares for and brings about the coming to us of the re-creative pentecostal wind and fire.

The earthly life of the Word-made-flesh is a matter of historical fact: the events which made it up happened once and for all two thousand years ago in Palestine. But the transforming or transfiguring of humanity which they both signify and effect goes on unceasingly day by day, here and now: day by day the new pentecostal life is given to men by the creative Spirit, acting principally through the Christian Mystery, the sacramental life of the Church, the Fire kindling and energizing our drab inertia, turning the dross into gold or, as some of the mystics put it, acting upon the dull iron of our humanity to make it itself incandescent. The better we understand that process and what it demands of us the more responsive to it we are likely to be; and in our

efforts to understand it we can derive immense help both from the biblical prefigurings of the Word's journey and also in some degree from the extra-biblical statements of the same or some similar theme.

The same, or similar: it is sometimes objected that any suggestion of kinship between pagan myth and Christian Mystery is bound to lead to misapprehensions, to distortions of the truth, for if the myths bear certain superficial resemblances to the Christian reality, nevertheless they are basically different. But, given a firm grasp of the essentials of the Christian revelation and a sound understanding of and docility towards the Church's formulations of doctrinal truth, this argument is not valid. Differences there are indeed; but why need they disturb us if we are prepared for them? Dante did not despise or reject the guidance of the pagan Virgil; and we might recall here St Thomas's admonition, in his *De Modo Studendi*, that in our studies we should be concerned not with the authorship but with the intrinsic truth or falsehood of what we read. We may disagree profoundly with a philosopher and still derive immense enlightenment from his writings. It would be folly indeed for us to despise the help provided for us by all the extra-biblical statements of the theme of the dark journey: for they can give us fresh insight into over-familiar words and images, they have power to throw into relief new facets of reality, hitherto unnoticed; and, last but not least, they can help us to achieve what the Christian as such must strive to achieve, a sense of the solidarity and unity of all mankind in its laborious and often agonized struggle to arrive at that divine and immortal life which it recognizes, whether dimly or clearly, as its ultimate goal.

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