

THE DESERT

The Editor

ST Thomas derives the word for 'religion' from the Latin '*religare*' which means to bind together. Whether or not his etymology is correct, there is no doubt that the idea of binding together supplies the basic reality of religion by which man is bound to God and bound to the whole of God's creation. It was the sense of solidarity with the entire universe and the divine spirits who guided it that inspired the primitive conception of religion. The Jews perfected this sense of dependence, and finally our Lord transformed it—yet always leaving man aware that he could not escape from God who gives him life nor from the world through which that life comes to him.

Yet without the fulfilment of the true religion men were too easily held captive in this dependence and solidarity. They recognised the bonds that held them as tying them to the vast inescapable machine of the spheres. There was nothing but a collectivity and unless man by magical rites and such like superstitions kept in step with the rhythm of the heavens he was doomed to extinction. The 'higher' religions tried often to remove man from this enthrallment by insisting on the freedom and perfection of his mind, so that he tended to free himself from the '*religatio*' or binding rules of worship and give himself over to a more and more individualistic contemplation in which there was no longer any solidarity with the rest of the world that God had made. This was an escape that denied the basis of religion. Suffering and even death were not valuable as sacrifices but rather as disentanglements.

The true religion of Jahwe and of Christ avoided this escapism by the application of what we may call the 'principle of the desert'. Abraham remained with his people until such time as the Lord told him: 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred and from thy father's house'. The settled life of the farmer had to be sacrificed to the freer and more lonely life of the nomad, and the children of Israel were thenceforward to be constantly on the march

in desert places. Out in the arid mountains man becomes detached from a regular life and has to rely more and more upon the will of the hidden God who sends storms and sunshine, and in the direst need provides water from the rock. The farmer tends to worship the impersonal spirits of the earth and to hold tenaciously to ancient customs, often superstitious. In the desert the nomad finds that it is the God of the heavens who goes with him all the day and towers over him as he sleeps at night. Often the Father of heaven is terrifying, but he is very personal and intimate with his people.

It is not only the tribe as a whole that is pushed by the Spirit into desert places. Abraham has to take his son to be sacrificed alone on the mountain; Moses is a fugitive from society and even cast off by his own people; David has to hide in field and cave to save his life. It is the Spirit who leads our Lord out into the desert before he begins his mission. The will of God is thus all the time separating the chosen race from the bondage of the universe, from the bondage of a universal society—that is from the bondage of the earth and the overbearing possessiveness of parents. But also the individual under the hand of God is being separated from the bondage of tribal life with its oppressive superstitions and over-elaborated worship, until he eventually realises that it is not by bread alone that he lives, but by every word that the Father of heaven may utter. This is the essential bond of religion—held alone to the Word and the will of the Father.

This principle of the desert is very different from that of the professional ascetic. While the tribe is wandering in the hills, the high-minded philosopher is mortifying his flesh. The body cumbers his spirit. This bondage must be broken so that he may be liberated in mind and soul from the passions and the low emotions of sense. The ascetic takes himself out into his own home-made desert where he may dwell alone, undisturbed by the world and its folk. But within his mind he preserves a wonderful world of beautiful ideas to which he is bound, unknown almost to himself. The thongs of thought hold more tightly because invisible. Socrates looks forward to death because that is only the

casting away of the filthy rags of sense so that the soul may go marching on in perfect freedom.

Not so the children of Israel in the desert, not so the Son of God as he approaches the final desert of Calvary. Christian mortification is really morti-fying, because it makes to die, not by choice but by the indomitable will of the Father of heaven, it makes the person to die. As the blood pours down the wood of the cross Christ dies, it is not merely the death of his physical part. He said so often that the Son of man must die, not that his soul must be separated from his body. The mystery of the abandoned cry on Calvary is just this—he did not remain tranquilly enjoying the beatific vision unmoved by the suffering and expiring of his 'lower nature'. 'This chalice' that he accepted from the will of the Father meant all, not merely a part of his life.

The Christian desert then is not so much that of the early eastern fathers, many of whom were as much moved by the example of Socrates as by that of the Cross. It is not the self-imposed penances by which a man attempts to 'overcome the flesh'. Experience shows that so many Christians will set about mortification in this philosophical way, taking their disciplines and wearing their hair shirts, fasting and spending long hours in vigil upon their knees. And these ascetics learn to preserve their own ideas more and more tenaciously. The attachments to their own conceits is far more constricting and binding than the simple superstitions of the country folk. Finally, too, they become attached to their own mortifications which are turned into a new form of magic.

The Christian is forced out into the desert by the will of God. His mortifications are those of the hand of God lying often heavily upon him. He recognises the necessity of God's direction; he finds his isolation in the exercise of authority over him. God speaks to him through his surroundings, his neighbours, his superiors—and always it leads to total death. He must relinquish his own ideas. He must wander parched and famished for days and weeks and years. He *must* suffer these things—it is not merely his own choice that leads him into the rocky tracts of land. There are times too when the will of the Father appears to him in

the impetuous Spirit of infinite love. He must suffer because he loves. He sees his beloved to suffer and cannot rest until he also is nailed to the Cross, held up aloft away from the world and its twirling seasons of life and death. 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'

It is here especially that the great Christian tradition of voluntary mortification enters. It is 'voluntary' because chosen under the impetus of the love of Christ and hatred of sin. The act of the will is still subordinated to the impelling force of God's will; although a choice is involved, it is the choice of a free obedience that leads the good Christian to nail himself to the Cross or to wish to be anathema for Christ. The purifying desert of God's will lies at the heart of 'If thou wilt let this chalice pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will. . . .'

The ideal of the Christian desert is not that of aridity and death. It is a region of the greatest fruitfulness where man finds again companionship, first with the Father of heaven and then with his own kind, with the world and with the whole universe. The tribe of Israel so often forgot this and thought that they were being separated out in order to remain for ever alone, the one and only tribe of Jahwe. Isaias tried to tell them that the desert led to a place of plenty where the whole world, all tribes and races would be gathered together as one under the loving protection of the Father of heaven. Abraham was not merely commanded to leave all his kith and kin, he was told to do this because God was to bring him to a land and to make of him a great nation—'and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed'. The worship of the Christian will be one in tune with the whole world, in harmony with the song of the spheres, but rid of all bondage and superstition. Christ dies in order that he may rise again and the earth may be full of his life. As his Father had led the Israelites through the desert to a land flowing with milk and honey, so he leads his Son through the desert of Calvary to the companionship of the new life on the side of the lake—'Simon, son of John, lovest thou me? Feed my lambs.'