

Death by Water

by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.

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Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus in his historical existence, the man whom God lived and who lived God for us, was God's way of reading the world, God's way of making sense of the world. His life amongst us was a hermeneutic of man in the world before God, an interpretation of the human condition which (in historical fact and not *a fortiori*) was and is a radical criticism of all other ways of reading the world; his life, and more particularly his death, which was the meaning of that life, shows that all other attempts to discover and express the significance of what it is to be human have been mistaken or deficient. The only true understanding of our living and dying is his living and dying; any other form of living and dying is to some degree perverted. Any living and dying that we might be able to manage ourselves is going to be less than true. Only his biography, his 'name', is able to make our biographies, our 'names', ultimately true readings of what it is to be human, to stand before God in the world. There is salvation in no other name. If we are to be whole, we have in some way to learn to abandon what we have received.

What must we do?

Baptism according to the tradition of the Church is 'necessary to salvation'. That has come to be understood to mean that, at least so far as baptism in the straightforward sense of the sacrament of water-baptism is concerned, it is necessary to salvation for those who have been brought to see that it is so necessary. Baptism is the answer to a question, 'What must (*dei*) I do to be saved?'¹ What shall we do?—The question asked by people who have heard the story of Jesus of Nazareth and felt themselves threatened by it, found themselves interpreted to themselves by it as out of true, as sinners. The question asked by people who in hearing the story of Jesus have experienced the future-shock of realizing that the world they believed in no longer exists but has been made obsolete and lethal by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. They then search around for some strategy for survival, and question the people who have shown them that their lives are already lost: What must we do? And the answer they receive is compounded of an exhortation to repentance, faith and baptism: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus; . . . repent and be baptized.' The only strategy for survival, the only technique for them to keep alive, is for them to loose themselves from their rootedness in the past, the past of the tribe and their individual past, to repent. And then to pass over into the

¹Acts 16, 30. The gaoler's question to Paul and Silas. Jesus 'must' (*dei*) be about his Father's business (Luke 2,49), preach the kingdom (Luke 4,43), suffer many things (Luke 9,22). His name is the only name given amongst men by which we must (*dei*) be saved (Acts 4,12). The necessity of baptism follows from a perception of what *must* be in the plan of God, of what has to be.

future which is there already in Jesus, to believe, to trust themselves to him. And to be baptized. The only way for them to live is to enter into that experience which is the way that Jesus has occurred as Lord, the experience above all of his dying and his being raised, and to enter into that in the way in which it can still happen for them, not speculatively but sacramentally and morally, not in the head but spiritually. If they are to be saved, they must (*dei*) repent, believe and be baptized.

Baptism is the sacrament of repentance and, as people have called it from at least the time of Tertullian onwards, the sacrament of faith. But as Augustine puts it, *Sacramentum fidei fides est*. Baptism not so much ritualizes externally an already existing independent faith in the heart; rather it functions as what counts as faith, and as what counts as repentance too. In submitting to being baptized, a man *is* repenting and trusting. When he asks what he must do to be saved, to survive, he is given this absurd answer which involves him in absurd situations. If he is going to survive, he is going to have to let go of anything that counted as a certainty and anything in the way of pretence and trust himself as he is to people whom he has probably realized already are no cleverer than he is; through their mediation he will be trusting himself to the meaning of all that is, to the ground of being and the granite of it, to that which or he whom he has discovered that these others are prepared to call 'Father'. He is going to have to be accepted by them as he really is, naked, like a new-born baby or Christ dying on the cross; with his clothes, all his roles will be stripped away, all the ways in which he would like to present himself to other people. And according to one significant tradition, he will not know what is going to happen to him, he will have no guarantees or certainties of the sort he would have had if he had gone through the rite beforehand. He will find himself in a situation for which he is not prepared, and will be told to do absurd things like stepping down into a bath of water, and he will have a series of questions fired at him, asking him whether he does reject his past and the dead world in which other people still live, asking him whether he believes in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. And as he answers, he will have water poured over him or even be plunged underneath the water, with no certainty that he will come up again. And that, he is told, will save him.

Like the initiation into any school or fraternity or tribe, this initiation involves uncertainty, having to make an act of faith in other people to see him through. Afterwards it will not seem exaggerated for the baptized person to speak of what he has gone through in terms of death or birth. Death by water, the kind of death in which a man's whole life is said to flash before his eyes, to be affirmed or denied (as with Pincher Martin). For the man who is being baptized, that whole past life has to be rejected, repented of, because unless he alienates himself from it, he is not going to be able to

find a new life, he is not going to be able to enter into the life which, as lived by Jesus of Nazareth, exposed the unreality of all other ways of living. If he is going to be able to be born again, he will have to admit that he has failed in being born the first time.

Life in Jesus

While he is in the water, affirming his trust in the story and the person of Jesus of Nazareth, that story, that name, is invoked over him. What happened in Jesus, the historical way in which Jesus of Nazareth has occurred as Lord and Christ, that is called down on the man who is being baptized. Words are spoken which bind time and make it possible for the once-and-for-all event of the past to become contemporary with the present of the man who has gone down into the waters. 'All that was visible in Christ our Redeemer has passed into the sacraments of the Church' (Leo). Baptism is the point at which for the first time God conforms the life of the repentant but trusting sinner to the life of Christ. It will be possible to say that the baptizand is crucified with Christ, risen with Christ, seated in the heavenly places with Christ. He shares a common history and a common destiny with Jesus of Nazareth whom God has made Lord and Christ. He has 'put on Christ', put him on as a man puts on a garment, put him on 'as iron puts on fire, as air puts on sunlight, as wool puts on colour' (Eckhardt), put him on as a man puts on weight, being changed in his character, becoming a different person by doing so. With that common destiny, all that belongs to Christ now belongs to him. Christ's Father is his Father, the Father to whom now for the first time he dares to pray in the words that Jesus has given him to pray with. Christ's brethren are his brethren, the brothers and sisters who welcome him as he comes up from the font by anointing him with oil and giving him clean new clothes to wear and kissing him with the kiss of peace. Having been immersed in the destructive element, he is given a new name, a new project, a new destiny, which is the destiny and the fate of Jesus in the world.

Since that is given him in his baptism, he cannot expect to get beyond his baptism. Anything that later happens to him is already contained in advance in what happened to him in the font, in the destiny to which he was committed then. In any person's life there are moments which come and go, but whose significance seems to give meaning to perhaps years of previous decisions which then show that in some way they were about this one significant moment. In baptism, it is the opposite that is the case. The moment of truth comes first; it precedes in time the long succession of moments to moments, but in advance it gives them their meaning, it removes them from the necessity of being just one damned thing after another. So baptism is not just the first moment in a series of consecutive moments, but is different from them in quality as well as being discrete from them in time. It is like the prothesis of a play, that

moment at which the burden on the audience occurs (Marc Connelly). The baptizand has seen the setting and the actors, and then the opening words of the drama of his new life are invoked upon him, he is baptized in and into the name of Jesus, and on those words all that is to follow depends. The words are not of the same sort as any later words, they cannot be omitted without the collapse of the whole of the subsequent performance; equally, in being spoken they commit the actors to the rest of the play, to becoming the characters they have taken on themselves. The man is baptized into, towards, the name of Jesus, towards making the name of Jesus, the story of Jesus, his own biography and name. His baptism is a *gedünken* experiment for what the rest of his life might involve. What cannot be foreseen in the process of his daily and terminal dying and rising has in his baptism already been envisaged and its result anticipated, the result which is the kingdom of God, the new name, the new God, the new family, resurrection.

The character which the man has to become is given him already in the event of his being baptized. The rest of his life will be an attempt to be true to that, to go on affirming what he affirmed in baptism, to go on meaning his baptism, to internalize the font, to discover in himself a fountain of water springing up to eternal life. He is invited and required to internalize the name, the identity, which was given him from without, by the community of those who first told him the story of Jesus, who first preached that story to him as one that condemned him and offered him a chance of being born again, of being born properly. He is offered a new heart and a new soul, a new ego, a new centre of gravity, in the Spirit of Jesus which can only be talked about in terms of wind and fire and water. His choice of the God and Father of Jesus to be *his* God and Father, his affirmation that the history and destiny of Jesus are to become his destiny, is an act of self-definition which commits him to discovering himself in the fellowship of those whom he has accepted as his new brethren, the Catholic Church, those who are his brethren only because they too have heard and responded to the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth as the meaning of man in the world and so in their turn entered that community of people created by the continual preaching of Jesus as the Word of God. The situation in which he finds himself as he comes up from the font is that of the Church, the extended community that has formed around the historical person of Jesus, a community founded on the event of his life and death and resurrection, and structured by that life and death and resurrection as it has passed into language in the scriptures and into the visible language of the sacraments. All of that is given to him in being baptized, and by becoming true to that he will be saved, by meaning that he will be saved.

He has accepted all who have heard the word about Jesus as his brethren, the *permixtum corpus* which is the Catholic Church.

Baptismal living means going on affirming that the only criterion that finally matters is God's acceptance of the other people in the Church, and not being sectarian on the basis of moral holiness or personal compatibility or theological stance. If God is to be affirmed as his God, then he must affirm all the baptized as his brethren, and not do anything to define himself over against them, to define himself and those with whom he has to do by reference to any of the other baptized as outsiders. Baptismal living means that he has not been given the luxury of an outsider in the Church to define himself over against. It is in the measure that he continues to be Catholic, to accept all the baptized simply because they are baptized, that he will go on meaning his own baptism, that he will continue to live his baptism, to live in that situation of being always dependent on the pure grace of God, altogether free but not cheap. And that will continue to save him.

Death in Jesus

To some of the baptized there is given the opportunity to mean their baptism to the fullest extent, to realize visibly what it means. The reality of all the playing around with water and fire in the celebration of baptism is martyrdom, perhaps the long slow martyrdom of living out one's death from day to day, but most typically the baptism of blood. The martyr is the type of the Church, the real church-man, the one in whom the baptized and baptizing Church has always seen itself reflected. Timothy is told to 'fight the beautiful fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the beautiful confession in the presence of many witnesses'. But being true to the confession which he made as he was baptized may mean acknowledging Jesus as the only name by which people can be saved in situations of persecution, when other people are affirming the validity of false understandings of the meaning of human existence. Martyrdom, the violent death for the sake of Christ, the death of 'a man who had become what he could and was what he was, ready at any moment to gather everything into one simple sacrifice' is the most appropriate reflection of baptism in water, dying altogether into the passion of Christ. Baptism of blood is not a poor substitute for water baptism when that is not possible, but is the reality of it, the real dying in faith, dying into the passion of Christ, of which water baptism is an imaging. The martyr is baptized with his own blood, which is the blood of Christ himself. Not only with his lips does the martyr confess Christ, but with his whole life, in such a way that he holds nothing back at all, that he has nothing of his own to rely on but commits himself altogether into the hands of God, and now with no mediation on the part of the community. The martyr, says Cyprian, is baptized with that most glorious and noble baptism which the Lord was talking about when he said that he had another

baptism to be baptized with. In water baptism, says Thomas,¹ the passion of Christ works through a sort of figurative representation; in the baptism of blood it works through the imitation of the deed itself. And so martyrdom is the highest form of being baptized. In being baptized with water, a man trusts himself to the community of those who, he expects, will make him welcome, will love and care for him; and through them he trusts himself to their God. In being baptized with his own blood, a man trusts himself to God in trusting himself to those who he knows will not love him and care for him but will do all they can to destroy him both body and soul. That is what makes martyrdom function not only as the sacrament of faith but as faith itself in its supreme manifestation, the most incarnate way in which the dying and rising of Jesus still occurs to reveal the reality of other ways of living, to disclose that the world that now is is both dead and death-dealing.

Male, Mailer, Female

by David Lodge

The Reviewer approached *The Prisoner of Sex*² with a quickened heart-beat of keen expectation, but warily, unsure whether he hoped to find it a triumph or a failure. Norman Mailer was for his money one of the most interesting and entertaining of contemporary American writers, a man who had recovered from that direst of literary fates, the best-selling first novel followed by a string of failures, and by sheer effort and character remade himself as an artist in middle age. In particular the Reviewer admired semi-confessional, semi-documentary works, like *The Armies of the Night* and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* in which Norman wrote about himself in the third person, as the Novelist, the Historian, the Journalist, thus achieving a delicious ironic detachment from his own ego without which indeed his matter and manner could become tiresomely pretentious and irresponsibly extreme.

Peeking into the opening pages of the new book, the Reviewer was glad to see that it was written in the ironic third-person mode, but he was well aware too of what polemical purpose it in this case served. The same cultural trade-winds that had brought across the Atlantic tidings of the growing strength of the movement for Women's Liberation, and the growing fame of its chief prophet, Kate Millett, had also conveyed whiffs of the excitement greeting Norman's counterblast, originally rushed to the public in a single issue of *Harper's* magazine, to Women's Lib in general and Kate

¹*Summa Theologica*, 3a. 66. 12c.

²*The Prisoner of Sex*, by Norman Mailer. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. £2.