

THE MYSTICAL LIFE OF ISAIAS: I

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ISAIAS was a member of a junior clan of the house of David, dwelling in Jerusalem in the age when the ferocious imperialism of Assyria overwhelmed first the north, then the centre of the Israelite peoples, and menaced little Judah when it remained the sole remnant of the tribes that Moses had led out of Egypt. His work was to be the spiritual guide and prophet of its survival, to be ascribed solely to deep faith in God, at the same time as he announced the doctrine of the Incarnation to men. But his prophetic office also involved a spiritual development in his own soul, which can here be traced as far as the records permit.

Isaias was a man of virtue. Sin he seems unacquainted with. He belongs to that class of saints whose history tempts one to incredulity, whose first lisplings are of piety, whose perfection begins with the use of reason, and is sullied only by such slight faults as can scarcely be called sins. This fact throws into high relief the truth he teaches most forcefully among all the inspired writers, the holiness of God, before whom even such innocence seems sin.

He was first moved to preach by the evils abounding in Judah. He saw the worship of the temple of the true and living God performed by men who practised every social injustice, who were corrupt with greed, vanity, fraud, superstition, idolatry. Roused like earlier prophets to protest, he called for repentance and the works of justice and mercy; threatened divine punishment for flouting the laws of God and his own warning words; but predicted no specific punitive event in the near future. His large and generous mind saw that sin leads to affliction sent by God, but his comminations were conditional, for he knew and announced the tradition of the second David who was to come to reign in power and righteousness over a purified Judah, and this prospect mitigated the immediacy and gravity of its downfall.

His first utterances show a tremendous and visionary poetry, the product of nobility of mind and vastness of imagination, the instrument and medium of intellectual greatness. The touching appeals he makes to the men of Judah and Jerusalem contain more-

over an equal emotional power but for which all else might be fruitless. From such a man and such a mind was to proceed a far profounder revelation of God than any yet given to any prophet: a revelation which was to transform himself, and Israel, and the world.

This moral zeal of the young Isaias was the ground in which God sowed the seed of greater works, and on which he built this supernatural life, the tale of whose advancement is the gradual purgation from sensitive and emotional impulses, which either spring from a hidden self-love or are contaminated by it, to a conformity with the divine will in all things. A second stage in his life began when he saw a vision (commemorated daily in the *Sanctus* of the Mass), in the light of which all his later life must be read. He saw God in his holiness, and with this, both his own sinfulness and the Messiah of tradition. Further, he learnt that this Messiah was somehow, though how he could not as yet see, God himself; that he was to teach this to the people of Judah; was to exhort them to absolute trust in Jahweh in the face of Assyria; and that those who believed him would be but few.

The essential and permeating quality of this divine communication was the holiness of God. The primitive ritual sanctity of the unapproachable or the unapproachable, that which an unexplained fear forbids men to handle or induces them to abstention, took in his soul not only the higher value it had always had in Israel since the revelation of Moses, but a new and larger meaning that makes Isaias's exposition of it the very fount of all revealed notions of what the word means at all. He realised that God's holiness is an unapproachability beside which all finite things are worthless, all high things base, all good things evil; even the natural that is good in itself is comparatively evil before so ineffable a transcendence of sovereign goodness, purity and perfection.

Correlative to this was the fact of one's own sinfulness. Perfect as Isaias had always been in the way of Jahweh, he found now he could claim no merit for this; he was aware of sinfulness without consciousness of sin. Though he had done no grave wrong as David had done, still less slipped into the many shuffling faults of the tepid, he found sin in himself. He found that proneness to evil, which he had along with all the sons of Adam. In all his goodness, he was yet empowered, forced, to feel before God's

awful majesty something that guilt feels in the presence of innocence.

This was not unreal. The feeling of self is somehow impure, unholy; it is as the natural centre of one's being, a knowing, and all cognition rouses pleasure and is embedded in sensual delectation. But there is a possibility of rising from this condition, and of being freed to a new and unsuspected world of *being*, where the familiar habits of mind are transcended, and the lower reason, the earthbound, the sense-girt realm of emotion, then fall into their lowly place. This is the course of mystical purgation set for all who walk in the way of life, but for Isaias it was followed out by the unique path set by his prophetic vocation, and is one of the first examples given the world of a kind of life which in myriads of instances remains for ever concealed from all but God.

In this process the self is cloven in two (ground up, *contritus*, the exact meaning of contrite). Its baser natural sources sink, the purified objective spirit prevails. Its two poles are the substantiality, the soul which God has created, and the ego generated by man's perversity. A certain degree of development of the ego as self-consciousness was pre-requisite for any such revelation in the mystical order to be given at all; for this was the epoch when the Greek intellect was beginning to find, for good and evil, all that could be extracted from the rich concept of personality. That people in another and natural mode found a high moral life, to be superseded for all mankind by the ultimate revelation of Christ.

The transformation required was a simpler process in a more primitive culture such as was the Hebrew. But here none the less it involved a grave innovation in men's moral habit, where the ego had had a far more resolute part to play than in the full dispensation of grace, where such disbelief in self has always had a firm basis in dogma.¹ The devout Israelite had a strong sense of the self because he was sustained in grace without the sacraments, save in their principles. He saw in every man the image of God, and was divinized by birth itself. All the earlier books of Scriptures are full of this robust, as if 'subjective', spirituality; till at the last, Elias, is ushered in the later phase of the Mosaic dispensation, where such innocent self-affirmation recedes before a higher and fuller concept of divine holiness. It is of this that

1. Luke 9, 24, John 3, 30.

Isaias is the supreme exponent; and he constantly expresses it in the phrase he originates: 'the Holy One of Israel'.

The consciousness of a lower and a higher self, by setting a contrast, shows up the sinfulness of the lower, prepares for *conscience* in the most explicit Christian sense, and reveals the truth of man's fallen state as expressed in our Lord's words,¹ 'If you, being evil, know how to give good things to your children . . .'. This is the only gospel reference to the state of original sin, and teaches how inferior is the natural good to the supernatural in the eyes of an all-holy God—even while it remains in itself good (Cf. Council of Trent, sess. 6, can. 7).

Only the purified soul can know God in his holiness, save as an intellectual abstraction. The enlightenment by which the soul finds a sense of sin is the first step towards its emancipation, and as it progresses in this truth, and comes to know itself for good and evil, in God, it never loses this initial humiliation, even as it learns, if it be so favoured, its God-given exaltation. All it knows is conditioned by divine enfolding, and its purification is all the time founded on the fact that it is needed. This was Isaias's revelation of the mystery of holiness. Beside this unutterable ideal the very righteousness of the just man is scarcely more than a species of pride; and implementation of this discovery filled his life for forty years to come. It was accompanied by the expansion of his prophetic knowledge till he came to know and be the perfected soul, dwelling in tranquillity and peace, secure in God; with a confidence and an indifference which accepts even the mystery of evil with a divine patience, since all is of God and nought escapes him. He who believes with this total faith shares something of God's own spiritual transcendence.

This is the divine presence, and is the Word of God, in which and for which every soul is made. It is known under varying forms and aspects, and in varying degrees, to all in a state of grace; but especially to the Christian, as the presence of Christ in the soul, that is the Word as Incarnate—as is shown in the writings of St John or St Paul, to limit examples to Scripture. To the Israelite, it was Jahweh, and never more than when, with David, he addresses God as 'My God', and in this spiritual presence the facts of the Trinity, in its eternity, and the Incarnation, as a promise for the future, are implicit, and must be read into the inspired writings

1. Luke II, 13.

with the fuller light of Catholic Faith. In Isaias, however, the divine presence was revealed gradually and with increasing elaboration, as of God to be Incarnate, and this is how he came to see that the Messiah of tradition was to be divine. The union of the concept of the Messiah to be born with that of Jahweh himself was, we conjecture, precisely what was infused into his soul, and is the centre of all his prophetic evolution. From this single mystical truth he drew all that fed his own advancement in perfection and all the truths he had to teach, whether to his own generation, about trust in that God who was to come, or to all future ages, witnessing when the Redeemer came to earth that his coming had been foretold seven centuries before.

Such was the light that transformed the preacher of morals into the prophet *par excellence* of the Messiah, the archetype of all prophecy, and the giver to Israel of the mystery for which it was chosen from the beginning. Yet all this was contained as in germ only at the vocational vision. Its paradoxical reversal of all notions of Godhead was difficult to impart, and all along was both slowly and obscurely imparted, so that not only throughout his own life, but also through later prophecy, a continual re-formulation and clarification was accomplished. All this is slowly unfolded in the course of the prophet's life.

Before acting, the prophet awaited the visitation of the Holy Ghost. His first intervention in public affairs occurred when Judah was attacked by its neighbours for refusing to join them in resistance to Assyria. They would replace by their own nominee the king of Judah, Ahaz, the feeble and unworthy heir of David. The scene is unforgettable. Ahaz, called on to exert confidence in Jahweh, flinched, and regarded the prophet's demand for a sign as 'tempting God'. Thereupon the prophet himself gave a sign, the Virgin who was to bear a Son, who was to be called 'God-with-us'. This critical act established for evermore the ascendancy of the prophetic office over the kingship. Isaias, not the son of David then living, had given witness that the house of David would live on; even if, in announcing this, he thought both people and kingship would undergo a temporary and purgative eclipse at the hands of Assyria.

But it was on this matter that there occurred a landslide in Isaias's so far ordered life with God. In the course of years it turned out that, after the Syro-Ephraimite war with Judah was

terminated, the Assyrian purgation also failed to take place. Even when the powerful state of the North was attacked, its capital besieged, its very political existence obliterated, the Assyrian advance failed to touch Judah; the terrible scene of chapter 10, 28-32 was not fulfilled and the divine judgment arrested.¹ Isaias was, we suspect, perplexed, for prophetic inspiration was from God and ought to come to pass. But, it seems, he reflected, and in humility revised his reading of his revelation and his whole spiritual outlook.

So unexpected a reprieve to Judah brought a disillusionment on his first confidence, and occasioned the only conversion he either needed or underwent. He had assumed boldly, with the example of previous prophets before him, that he was to predict a disaster he would see enacted by God's hand before his eyes. We know how disappointed was Jonas that his prediction was not fulfilled, regardless of the happy consequences for all but himself. Isaias, however, learnt to doubt his certitude, and to test his interpretations by the hard reality of facts. This humility, even on the subject of his heavenly inspirations, was his conversion, and gave a solidity to his sense of sin, gave reason too for the feelings which prompted self-condemnation. Henceforth his interior progress lay in the constant acceptance of mystery, the ever-expanding experience of discovering self-ignorance, and the opening of the soul to ever fresh and larger vision, leading to an increasingly self-obliterating sense of the greatness of God. He thereby ascended to, and came to reside permanently on, a higher plane, where the succession of temporal events was but an obscure reflection of the eternal laws of God, laws which they exemplified, as creaturely derivations from the eternal permanences. He saw into the larger cosmos of a divine order richer than any hitherto conceived in Israel, and his understanding lived in the things of the spirit beside which those of earth were but shadows.² Transcending the objects of the particular reason, those drawn from sense-experience, forming the mental integument of the natural

¹ This reading of Chapter 10, that it was Judah that was the object of doom-prophecy, not, originally, Assyria, can be defended by arguments for which we have no space here. It is supported by Dr Kissane's re-arrangement of that chapter in his *Isaiah*.

² If this is suggestive of neo-platonism, it must be replied that a true prophet may receive illumination according to a cast of mind containing implicitly the postulates of an erroneous philosophy if the epoch in which he lives has provided him with no other.

man, he resided in the realm of universal laws and spiritual principles by which all external events are to be judged, and from which they take their supernatural value. In this upper reach of the soul man shares the divine wisdom, and receives a passing glimpse of the immensity of the divine plan; yet to each who so sees, a little is overwhelming and all-sufficient. Even to him who seeks God, these things are dim and mysterious; to those whose spirituality remains on the plains, they are altogether imperceptible.

Isaias, who had always had the strong sense of God that included a firm faith in providence, now saw that if Judah had escaped, and was again to escape the 'Assyrian flood', this was not because God would never punish its sins, but because justice was beyond this life, and providence did not always bring upon evil-doing a manifest and rapid retribution, or show a justice immediate and evident. Herein Isaias saw and taught a larger conception of the divine nature than had ever been revealed to any man but Moses. Not only were the laws of retribution of a longer term of incidence and a wider application than any had so far dreamed, but they were for all nations and all time; for over all was this mighty God. Isaias found that he ought not to have expected him to sweep away the Judan state before his eyes because its offences hurt his own sense of God's honour and glory. Finally, if the divine justice is inexorable and executed on an eternal plan, they are also mitigated by a merciful withholding of punitive affliction. The mercy of God is indeed interwoven into every strand of Isaias's teachings, but especially from this reversal of the fate impending Judah.

On this mercy was founded the work of the Messiah. He was given to make men righteous and merciful, as he is given for the sake of justice—out of pure mercy. Above the daily or yearly fluctuations of kingdoms and peoples, above the limited outlook, even, of the nation of Israel, was the mysterious Man who was also God. Him Isaias knew present in his soul as the spiritual centre to his own inner life; and entering in this capacity into every man (one of the three advents the Church knows) this Man was to effect the transformation of mankind from its fallen state to that of one pleasing to God.

Supremely confident in this doctrine, Isaias concerned himself henceforth less with justice in society, and urged rather righteousness before God, by whole-hearted devotion and complete trust

in him who could and would perform the good he demanded amongst men. The Messianic reign would take effect in society only in so far as it was rooted in men's hearts. Faith, confidence, piety, virtue, righteousness, towards the Holy One of Israel are the notes of his later teaching. For the sake of this future Messianic appearance, when such goodness would prevail, Jahweh now spared the sinful but still Messianic people.

All these wonders silently took possession of his soul, and slowly remade his mind, so that their tracing through his works is by symptoms and flashes; the record of the soul in the mystical way is impalpably delicate. Beginning at his first diffidence in his own judgment, he grew in this grace to a maturity after which his life was in a spiritual repose and equilibrium, which can be read as an accompaniment to his prophecies and poems, warnings and exhortations. Concomitant with his spiritual growth is the literary, and Isaias is surpassed by no Hebrew poet for the riches, variety, tenderness, exaltation and vigour of his style, wide in range, powerful in effect, as he moves from the visionary rhetoric of his earlier years to the tranquil sublimity of his latest. They mark out in this respect the change from the young man's powerful emotions to the Bach-like serenity of a reasoned faith which knows no fear or doubt, and most of all, with increasing force, before the last grave assault of Assyria.

(To be concluded)



JESUS 'IMITATOR PATRIS'

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CHRISTIAN spirituality and ethics, when most closely linked with the central affirmations of the Faith, have been traditionally expounded in terms of the 'imitation of Christ'. This it is which has given them distinctively Christian 'shape', and secured that the Christian life is conceived as a possibility only because of the saving acts of God in Christ upon which it depends. To describe the Christian life as the 'imitation of Christ' is not to present it, however, as a bare literal mimicry, but to stress that, in fact, the life of the Christian man is fundamentally