

of the virtuous life, and by becoming a pilgrim on earth, following Christ mile by mile as the days pass, he may one day catch up with Christ and find that he is walking with the same footsteps as his Exemplar. In this way he will purify his life, acquire the true virtues, absorb into his very being the Christian rule of life, and expand his heart with the divine breath of supernatural virtue. And so the Christian, in his complete being, becomes a divine ray leaping out from the Word in whom all things are made, and penetrating the darkness of unformed and undirected material creation.



## THE SILENT JOY

S. M. GERARD, S.C.M.M.

**W**HEN one has traced the bridegroom and the bride motif in the pages of the Old Testament and seen with what divine persistence God wooed his chosen people lest the alliance be forgotten: 'I will espouse thee to me forever' (Osee 3, 19), one is the more forcibly struck by the few references in the Gospels of the New Testament to Christ as the Bridegroom of the Covenant. In the writings of the Four Evangelists the nuptial theme practically disappears, at least as far as direct allusion to Christ's fulfilment of the promised espousals goes. It is as if the actual *presence* of the 'young man' whom Isaias prophesied would come and 'dwell with the virgin' (Isaias 62, 5) made all further allusion unnecessary. Even in the Gospel of St John, where we find more evidence of the fulfilment-sense than in the other Gospels, there is only one mention made of the Bridegroom, the text spoken by the Baptist when he wished to point out to his disciples that he was not the Christ but only his 'friend': 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom who standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice.' (John 3, 29.) And even here we sense the veiled inference rather than the direct statement. There is nothing of the positive boldness we hear in: 'Behold the Lamb of God'. To point out the bridegroom to the Jews, the Precursor suggests rather than declares.

Christ himself seems strangely silent about this role. He does not hesitate to tell the Jews that he is the living Bread come down from heaven to fulfil the figurative manna which sustained their fathers in the desert, the Good Shepherd who would assuage their centuries-long thirst for the 'waters of refreshment' (Ps. 22), the King come to establish the universal kingdom which their prophets had foretold, who would rule in the hearts of men 'from sea to sea and from the river unto the ends of the earth'. (Ps. 71.) But we do not hear him say: 'I am the Bridegroom', although he comes to consummate the betrothals promised by his Father through the mouth of the prophet Osee. (Osee 3, 19.)

Why this silence? We know, as Pouget and Guitton have pointed out in their interesting study on the *Canticle of Canticles*, that until Christ's coming '... the entire Scriptures are directed to recalling the alliance to the people; the legal books detail its laws; the historical books recount its vicissitudes; the poetic books sing its sweetness'.<sup>1</sup> Yet when the Bridegroom himself appears, this time not behind walls or peeking through lattices, but dwelling in the flesh among men, little is said about his unique nuptial fulfilment of the whole course of Jewish history which had been a miraculous preparation for this: 'And the bridegroom shall rejoice over the bride: and thy God shall rejoice over thee.' (Isaiah 62, 5.) From his own lips we hear only what seems like an off-hand defence of his wine-drinking friends: 'Can the children of the bridegroom mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them?' (Matt. 9, 15.) As 'the friend of the bridegroom' had simply suggested, so the Bridegroom himself simply questions and infers. We are made conscious by both of them that the theme itself demands a restraint, a certain delicacy of expression which forbids the open avowal.

On the other hand, the eschatological references to the nuptial motif found in St Matthew's Gospel and the Apocalypse of St John are quite rich. We recall St John's beautiful description of the heavenly Jerusalem 'as a bride adorned for her husband' (Apoc. 21, 2), as well as his 'marriage supper of the Lamb' to which all the blessed are called. (Apoc. 19, 7.) St Matthew also, in two parables (Matt. 22, 25) alludes to the wedding feast which will coincide with the 'parousia' when a King shall make a marriage feast for his

<sup>1</sup> Pouget, W. and Guitton, J., *The Canticle of Canticles* (translation by Joseph L. Lilly, c.m.). D. X. McMullen Co., 1946, p. 143.

Son (Matt. 22, 1-14) and the wise virgins with their lamps will go forth to meet him and his bride. (Matt. 25, 1-13.) We notice a certain loosening of the tongue in these references to the eternal nuptial banquet when the blessed and the wise will go into the marriage supper and the door will be shut. We hear in the cry: 'Behold the Bridegroom cometh!' the positive boldness we missed in the Baptist. Although not lacking the restraint and delicacy of expression characteristic of our Lord and St John the Baptist, these wedding parables of St Matthew and the descriptions found in St John's Apocalypse certainly treat more freely and at greater length the eschatological significance of the nuptial theme than they do its present realisation in the person of Christ. Just as the burden of the Old Testament looks forward so expectantly to the first coming of the Bridegroom out of his bridechamber in heaven, so the main concern of the New Testament, when dealing with the nuptial motif, seems to centre itself on the Bridegroom's Second Coming when the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come! . . . Come, Lord Jesus!' (Apoc. 22, 17 & 21.) But as to Christ, the central figure around whom all revolves, we find he has little to say. He only defends the rejoicing of his friends because he, the Bridegroom, is with them. (Matt. 9, 15.)

Again, why this silence? Two possible reasons suggest themselves here. The matter of the nuptial theme itself (which we will return to),<sup>2</sup> and the fact that Christ, as the Bridegroom of the Covenant, was not so much concerned with declaring his love as with proving it. His Father in heaven, the Yahweh of the Jews, had often enough declared the everlastingness of that love and indeed had closed the seas upon the heads of the Egyptian armies to prove it. But still the old idolatries ever recurred, and Christ himself experienced over and over again the hardness of heart and stiffneckedness of this 'perverse and unbelieving generation' who until his coming (and even to our own day) were ever asking for a sign. He would give them a 'sign', even though he knew with a knowledge that would make him sweat blood in the Garden, that for many it would ever be 'a sign of contradiction' and 'a stumbling-block' which would grind them to powder (Matt. 21, 45). He would announce that the eternal espousals promised by

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note in passing, however, that the English poet, Patmore, committed a work on the *Sponsa Dei* to the fire because a friend and fellow-poet, G. M. Hopkins, said after reading it: 'That's telling secrets'.

his Father in the Old Law were now consummated in the everlasting Today of the New Dispensation, not this time by another declaration of love, 'I am the Bridegroom', but he would make that announcement by the supreme proof of love, by the unique sacrifice, by the lover's sublime act: He would give them the 'Sign' of the Cross. 'In this we have known the charity of God, because he hath laid down his life for us . . .' (I John 3, 16), and we also know that 'Greater love than this no one had . . .' (John 15, 13).

The Cross, then, is the Bridegroom's declaration of love for his bride. Many who stood in its shadow then did not understand it thus (as many who stand in its lengthened shadow today do not understand it). Instead they mocked: 'If thou be the Son of God, come down . . .' (Matt. 27, 40), not realising in a stupidity born of pride that the real proof of divine love is not to 'come down' but to stay, to stay *usque ad mortem* (again, just as many today still cry: 'if there be a God, let him relieve me of my suffering . . .', not yet having learned the lesson of Claudel that the Christian must not seek to escape his cross but must 'mount it, laughing'). Christ knew this would be so. The unbelief which would not hear Moses and the prophets (Luke 16, 31) would also not hear his call of love from the Cross. But there would be others:

. . . Hither then, last or first,

To hero of Calvary, Christ's feet—

Never ask if meaning it, wanting it, warned of it—men go.<sup>3</sup> And these generations of men would learn to contemplate at the feet of the 'hero of Calvary', as St Paul learned to contemplate it there: '. . . what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth . . .' (Ephes. 3, 18) of this Bridegroom's love for his bride, a love which manifests itself, not in word only, but in very deed and truth.

★ ★ ★

' . . . but one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance, and immediately there came out blood and water' (John 19, 34). How beautifully appropriate then that the early Fathers of the Church should view this solemn moment as the one when the Church, the Bride of Christ, was formed. Thus, St Augustine, in one of his homilies on St John's Gospel, tells us:

3 from Gerard Manley Hopkins' *Wreck of the Deutschland* (Edition R. Bridges).

Christ dies, that the Church may be formed. While Adam sleeps, Eve is formed from his side. When Christ is dead, his side is smitten with a spear that there may flow forth sacraments to form the Church. (Library of the Fathers, Homily IX on St John's Gospel, II, I-II, Vol. I.)

Is it not fitting that as Eve, the unfaithful bride of Adam, was formed in the silence of her bridegroom's natural sleep, the Church, the faithful bride of Christ, should be fashioned in that awful stillness when the blood and water flowed from the pierced heart of her Bridegroom? Divinity works in silence. We remember how Christ came down from his royal throne to begin the work of redemption 'while all things were in quiet silence, and the night was in the midst of her course . . .' (Introit from the Sunday within the Octave of the Nativity). And who can speak of the silence of that Virgin to whose chaste womb he came? Generations of those who have risen up to call her blessed have tried in vain to hear the words she did not say. ' . . . and his mother kept all these things carefully in her heart' (Luke 2, 51). Because Eve did not keep God's word in her heart but 'talked it over' with the serpent, Mary's own heart was pierced with a sword. But no flinching was there. The Gospel tells us she *stood*, in silence, and gazed on him 'whom they have pierced' (John 19, 37). Thus, to solder the link broken by Eve's loquaciousness, we witness a chain of silences—Christ, Mary, the Church—the fruitful silences leading man back to God.

It is also significant that the Church's sacramental life should be initiated in this silence on Calvary. St John Chrysostom, in the same theme as Augustine, develops the sacramental symbolism of the Church's formation:

Not without purpose, or by chance, did those fonts come forth (the water and the blood), but because by means of these two together the Church consists. And those initiated know it, being by water indeed regenerated, and nourished by the Blood and the Flesh. Hence the Mysteries take their beginning; that when you approach to that awful Cup, you may so approach, as drinking from the very Side. (Homily 85 on the Gospel of St John, Library of the Fathers, Vol. II, pp. 761, 762.)

St John Chrysostom makes it clear how essential to the Church's existence and growth is the sacramental life. The Church, in the beautiful Preface for the feast of the Sacred Heart, points to one

continuous source of that life for the members of the Body: '... O holy Lord, Father almighty and everlasting God. Who didst will that Thine only-begotten Son should be pierced by the soldier's lance as He hung upon the Cross: that from His opened Heart, as from a sanctuary of divine bounty, might be poured out upon us streams of mercy and grace.' Thus, we see that the sacramental mysteries 'take their beginning' in that solemn stillness when the Bridegroom silently forms his bride, not this time from 'the slime of the earth', but from the divine 'streams of mercy and grace' flowing forth from his side.

Further, we know in what silence those streams continue to flow. It is at the most solemn moment of the Roman Mass, 'While all things are in quiet silence...' that the words of the Consecration are pronounced. By them, the Bridegroom continues to declare his love for his bride, though once again not so much by word as by deed. Mystically, he dies daily on the altars of his Church, allowing her ministers to open his divine heart over and over again that those life-giving streams may never cease to flow. 'For the Church could not otherwise conceive believers and give birth to them again by the bath of regeneration if Christ did not die again, did not unite himself with his Church and did not himself give it the strength of his side, in order that all those born of the baptismal bath might grow.' (Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, VI, 3, 8.) This, then, is the Bridegroom's never ceasing avowal of love: to nourish daily by 'the strength of his side' the children born 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God'.



'The voice of joy and salvation is in the tabernacles of the just' (Ps. 117). As we might expect, 'the voice of joy' heard in the silence of the soul's communion with the Bridegroom is the final link in this 'chain of silences' enabling us to rejoice always in the Lord so intimately present to us. This is 'the voice of joy and the voice of gladness' of which Jeremias had spoken (Jer. 7, 34) which is inseparable from 'the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride'. Where there is Christ and his bride, there is joy. And this joy should characterise the whole Mystical Body. All Christians 'born of the baptismal bath' ought to be (to use St Augustine's phrase) 'an Alleluia from head to foot'. Others not yet regenerated

unto life ought to remark it, as André Gide was all but overwhelmed by the 'convincing joy' of his friend Paul Claudel.<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is not something we can pretend or call upon for special occasions. Joy is, after all, a fruit. Unless the world can say of us, as it remarked of the early Christians: 'See how they love one another', hardly will there be joy. It is from the silent depths of the soul's intimate communion with its God that joy sings. And the more individual Christians deepen that silence and make more intimate that communion, the more surely will the world not fail to notice how 'happy is that people whose God is the Lord' (Ps. 143, 15).

But though the world may notice the Christian's joy, it will never fully understand it. It will never know from what 'secret places' it springs. These are the lessons learned '... in the secret place of his tabernacle'. They cannot be 'explained' to others. This was the wisdom behind what was known as the *disciplina arcani*—the secret of the early Church. The mysteries of the Eucharist were zealously safeguarded from the vain curiosity of the uninitiated: and even among the Christians themselves these 'secrets' were not made common talk. They recognised that there are some experiences, indeed the most interior and most intense, which ever remain 'past telling of tongue'. As the Bridegroom's cross cannot be understood until, like St Paul, we nail ourselves to it, so his Eucharistic espousals remain the inviolable mystery of the individual soul who hides herself in the secret of his face far from the disturbance of men (Ps. 30, 21). She alone can sing with 'the voice of joy': 'O how great is the multitude of thy sweetness, O Lord: which thou hast *hidden* for them that fear thee!' (Ps. 30, 20.) We must first 'taste and see' before we can say 'how sweet is the Lord!' (Ps. 33, 9.)

Finally, these secrets, these mysteries, these fruitful silences must be safeguarded 'from the disturbance of men'. The Church has been appointed their guardian. To her has been entrusted the 'secrets of the King', and how wonderfully well she watches over them! The silence of the Bridegroom permeates the liturgy of the bride. Like him, she withdraws from the open avowal and the bold statement. Her liturgical prayer is characterised by a restraint, a reticence, a discretion which hints and suggests rather than

<sup>4</sup> Gide had remarked in one of his many letters to Claudel that he found 'nothing more contagious than sadness; nothing more convincing than joy'.

declares. Like her mystics of all ages, the Church knows that for some experiences 'there are no words'. She would not try to force them from our heart, but leaves them in that silence which is loud with joy. Nor would she invade the inviolability of their Source. How dare she when the Bridegroom, himself (as Jessica Powers, the Carmelite poet suggests), is 'loath to lift the bridal lace'. A theme so intimate requires the veil in order to inspire a proper reverence and sense of mystery in the faithful. For these mysteries are essentially nuptial mysteries begun by Christ's fulfilment of the eternal espousals promised by his Father to the people of Israel: 'I will espouse thee to me forever' (Osee 3, 19), betrothals sealed by the blood of his Cross, and continued in the sacramental mysteries of Baptism and the Eucharist.

Above all, the Church, the Bride of Christ, faithful to the spirit of her Bridegroom, continues to draw all men to the bridal-chamber of his Cross, offering up daily 'the sacrifices of justice . . . that the walls of Jerusalem may be built up'. (Ps. 50.) And for those who like the sparrow of the psalmist have found their nest there, 'Even thy altars, O Lord of Hosts, my King and my God' (Ps. 83), there is the dilatation of the heart, the opening out to joy, the deepening of those silences which cannot contain themselves but must forever cry: 'How lovely are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!' (Ps. 83.) These are they who regenerated unto life are constantly nourished by those ever-flowing 'streams of mercy and grace' which, like secret springs, unseen and unheard, feed the deep well of the soul's interior life.

Now I know that the Lord speaks from you, because you have mastered his silence.<sup>5</sup>



## A CERTAIN MAN MADE A GREAT SUPPER

A SERMON BY MEISTER ECKHART

*Homo quidam fecit cenam magnam . . .* (Luke 14, 16)

**A** CERTAIN man made a supper, a great evening meal. If you entertain in the morning, you invite all sorts of people, but in the evening you ask important people, people dear to you and your close friends.

<sup>5</sup> Gertrud Von Le Fort. *Hymns to the Church*.