

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

THE EDITOR

‘O DEATH, I will be thy death!’ The hidden words of Hebrew prophecy find at last their meaning in the dawn of Easter: an empty tomb, and the explanation, ‘He is not here, he has risen again’.

A continent may perish and our eyes stay dry. Into the fortress that is our final self public disaster comes only as a rumour. But the death of the beloved is an end of a world, and hope is over. It must be so if the resurrection is a ‘story that is madness’, as it seemed to the apostles when the women came back from the tomb with the news of the stone rolled away and the grave-clothes lying empty on the floor. Under the paralysis of loss, only the cold, still body stays in the mind. And that mood has its truth, for death too has its rights. The corrupting fact of it goes before the fact of its redemption.

There had been another stone to roll away. The resurrection is a promise fulfilled, and it is in the first light of the predestined covenant between God and his chosen people that Jacob comes to the well to meet Rachel. ‘And Jacob went near and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. And Jacob kissed Rachel and lifted up his voice and wept.’ And it is at Jacob’s well that the Son of God speaks with the Samaritan woman and promises to her and to every believer the ‘spring of water within him that flows continually to bring him eternal life’.

The living water is hidden, imprisoned under the stone. But, with the stone removed, it springs to life, it brings release. The pain of separation is at an end, and Jacob’s kiss prefigures the joy of every reconciliation. To the Samaritan woman, no less than to Peter when the truth came crowding into his mind, there is an end now to the exile of waiting.

The resurrection of Christ, that event in time recorded and known, is not simply an isolated fact, but the ultimate revealing of the mystery that lies at the heart of man’s life in the world. Here at last the hints and echoes of redemption are made plain. The living waters surge into a triumphant fountain, for the barriers

are down for ever. This is what man was made for, and at the moment of his dying he begins to live.

But is it true? The event we acknowledge owes nothing to our acknowledgment. It happened—and we are free. It was a myth—and we are inescapably left in the wilderness with no way out. We cannot stand by that empty tomb as observers. We were there, within, ourselves. That taking of human flesh which we call the incarnation involves us in its triumph no less than in its humiliation. 'It behoved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren', and there is nothing human that has not shared in the healing work that was achieved through suffering, death and resurrection.

Pain, the misery of darkened minds and tortured bodies, begins at once to cast its cloud across the horizon of this new joy. Yet pain itself, at every level from the aching tooth to the distress of nations, contributes mysteriously to the total work of redemption. The suffering of Golgotha, if it is to have any meaning at all, is not merely a symbol, not a gesture, but the cruellest reality experienced in a human nature most sensitively responsive to the deepest assaults of pain. In it, and through it, all other pain and sadness and the heavy weight of all the sin of the world is taken up, not in the grudging necessity of a burden but in the willing sacrifice of love. So it is that Dame Julian of Norwich can say: 'Because he sheweth to us time of his Passion, as he bare it in this life, and his Cross, therefore we are in dis-ease and travail with him, as our frailty asketh. And the cause why he suffereth it to be so is for that he will of his goodness make us the higher with him in his bliss; and for this little pain that we suffer here we shall have an high endless knowing in God which we might never have without that.'

Easter, then, is the context of Calvary, and the bitterest agony, even that of death itself, looks already to the new life it is beginning to inherit. Here is no closed cycle of death and life known at the same level, self-circled, unredeemed. It is more than the sequence of seasons, winter and spring, though even the rhythm of nature itself proclaims the need for the grain of wheat to die that the fruit may come. The resurrection is not an old life restored but a new life inherited: the pattern of time and change gives place to eternity.

For the believer—yes. But can even the vestiges of belief have

meaning in a world that seems increasingly organised to reject them? Is Easter more than a highly moveable feast that the world should stop to consider its implications? There is indeed a type of theocratic mind that will find a 'religious' answer to unlikely problems. Economic disasters, military campaigns, diplomatic negotiations: all alike have found interpreters who see failure as the inevitable price of loss of faith. And it needs no great wisdom to discern a primal disaster of the spirit of which our miseries are but varying reflections. If truth is one and indivisible, then a failure at its heart must bring failure elsewhere too. The nagging intrusion of latter-day prophets, who have a Jeremiah's capacity for reproach but lack too often his mercy, can avail little unless the tragedy is seen at its deepest level. Useless to complain of this or that injustice unless we recognise what the bases of justice themselves must be. To speak of time is at last to speak of eternity.

At Easter, then, we can pause for a moment and see into our own selves and look for a way out of the maze of our frustration. It is a humbling work: it is a death that must come before there can be hope of resurrection. For nations, too, it must come, this recognition of a common destiny, a single need. This is the basis of any prospect of peace or security. The holocaust of a war, and the miseries that have come after, will not have been vain if they are accepted as the price men have to pay for wisdom—the wisdom that accepts disaster so that it may redeem disaster.

There will this April, one supposes, be little to remind the men of Moscow that it is Easter morning. In fact the reckoning brings another date in much of the Europe coterminous with Russian power. Perhaps that is in itself a symbol of the gulf that divides what once was Christendom. And yet hope cannot die in the light of that tremendous dawn which, whether or not men recognise its source, has illumined all that is good and just and true.