

LITURGY AND SPIRITUAL EXEGESIS¹

THE liturgical revival, or more precisely, a renewed understanding of the liturgy, involves a biblical revival. It must be admitted that such a statement is rarely received enthusiastically. The most resolute good intentions (and it is mainly priests we have in mind, and priests who are full of zeal for souls), the most resolute good intentions, seem to falter under such a blow! 'What?' it will be said, 'we must "initiate" people into the Bible? As though it were not difficult enough to "initiate" them into the liturgy alone!'

To this protest we may reply that the fact is already there. Our liturgy, the Roman liturgy, is biblical from beginning to end. Not only is it mostly composed of biblical texts (or at least biblical commentary) but even those parts which are purely ecclesiastical in composition, breathe the same atmosphere, use the same vocabulary, the same forms of thought, as the biblical texts themselves. These arguments will have little weight, however, with many of those who protest against a 'biblical initiation' in addition to a liturgical; and it is not difficult to see why.

By 'liturgical initiation' they do not understand at all an initiation into the traditional liturgy, for which they have no more taste nor interest than they have for Holy Scripture. What they envisage is rather a quite new 'concoction', a liturgy re-made in an emancipated form, intended to 'make contact with the masses' by getting rid of everything in our actual liturgy which betrays its biblical or patristic origin. In this spirit, an eminent parish priest, in a large town, said recently: 'We must re-think the Canon of the Mass!' meaning by that, as he himself explained, that we must throw overboard, *Munera pueri tui justi Abel, et sacrificium patriarchae nostri Abrahae et quod tibi obtulit summus sacerdos tuus Melchisedech*. This tendency to reject the past, on the pretext of actuality, is one of the most dangerous among Christians today. It would incline us to forget, if we gave in to it, that Christianity is a Revelation, that it is to the Apostles that this Revelation was made, and that it is the Church which transmits it to us in her living tradition. In other words, the way in which certain people (not always with the intrepid logic of our parish priest) are trying to put 'Catholicism on the map', amounts precisely to suppressing it!

Thank God, such follies are still rare, and most of those concerned do not realise the road they are on, nor where it leads to. But what about all those other people who feel (though it may be confusedly)

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the richness of the Missal and Breviary, who want to draw life from them and enable others to do so, yet are dissatisfied and sceptical when we tell them: 'To study the liturgy, means to study the Bible'? They say that biblical study would be too unattractive to their parishioners, but what do they really know about it? And in this question we have the key to the mystery (and perhaps also to the 'radicalism' of the other group). The priests we have in mind will say: 'We know from our own experience what study of the Bible consists of, and we know that the average person takes no interest in the sources of the Pentateuch, the Synoptic problem, or the chronology of the Pauline Epistles'. In other words the prejudice against biblical study among so many of the clergy, arises chiefly from memories of their own education. The apologetic requirements of modern exegesis have had an unfortunate reaction on many seminarists, leaving them with the impression that to study the Bible is merely to plunge into a morass of confused technical problems, which have no meaning at all for any but specialists.

A great deal might be said about this state of affairs. It cannot be denied that it is distressing, but perhaps it is some consolation to know that Catholic seminarists are not the only, nor the worst, sufferers. We find the same situation, aggravated, among both Protestants and Anglicans. For them indeed it means—Biblical theology being as it is their only theology—that for the last twenty years their students have had the feeling that their studies were taking everything away from them and giving them nothing. We Catholics have not yet reached that point, and thanks to the fact that the Catholic receives the divine Word first of all through living tradition, there is no occasion to fear that we shall reach it, but there is very real occasion to shake ourselves, and get rid of a deadly misunderstanding.

A closer relation of the Bible and the liturgy is the best means to that end.

I.

The way, indeed, in which the Bible is utilised by the liturgy should show clerics that there is quite another way of studying it from that which has left them such bitter memories. It is possible to read the Bible in order to refute Wellhausen, Harnack or Loisy, but one can also read it in order to commune with St Athanasius, St Augustine or St Leo, and the two methods involved are no more alike than the two ends in view. To be explicit: the knowledge of the Bible required for a knowledge of the liturgy is not a *critical* but a *spiritual* knowledge.

It all holds together; we no longer appreciate or understand the liturgy, because we no longer appreciate nor understand the Bible. But in its turn the Bible is no longer appreciated nor understood because spiritual exegesis is misunderstood, or rather, unknown.

To say this is to risk an explosion. To begin with, the way in which we have been led to regard spiritual exegesis from the standpoint of critical exegesis suggests an opposition between them. If we yield to this suggestion, however slightly, critical exegesis will summon to its defence arguments of such a weight and nature that the conflict becomes embittered and insoluble. Nor is this the most serious consequence. Spiritual exegesis, in name at least, enjoys today an undeniable return to favour, but unfortunately some of the circles which have taken it up most warmly, and some of the books produced to advocate it, are of a kind to rouse most justifiable mistrust. 'If that is what you are proposing to us', it may be said, 'in exchange for the kind of exegesis we know, No, thank you! We know Charybdis, and have no inclination to sample Scylla!'

The first thing then is to define what we mean by 'spiritual exegesis'. The spiritual exegesis implicit in the whole liturgy is dominated by two principles. The first is that the Bible is the Word of God; not a dead word imprisoned in the past, but a living word speaking immediately to the man of today as he takes part in the liturgical celebration, a word which concerns him, because it is for him that it has been, and continues to be, uttered. The second is a consequence of the first. It is that the Old Testament is illumined by the New, just as the New only reveals its depth if related to the Old. To be more exact, the bond between the two becomes clear through *allegory* in the sense in which antiquity used that term. That is to say that there is a double, or even a triple, meaning in, for instance, the narratives of the Old Testament; beneath the 'literal' sense, beneath the 'history', there is a *typological* sense relating to Christ and to the Church, and in the extension of this second sense, there is a third, the *anagogic* sense, relating to ourselves, listeners, hearers of the Word.

To say even so much is to raise a host of questions, all of which, more or less, amount to this: 'Is not this *triplex sensus* of the Scriptures simply a fantasy? Are not the typological and anagogical senses in fact just products of the imagination? Is it not moreover, from just such subjective interpretation as this, that modern criticism has been at pains to free us?

And at this point the advocates of 'radical transformation' intervene: 'Will you not now admit', they say, 'how obsolete the present liturgy is? Since it is rooted, as you point out, in such principles of interpretation, is it not clearly an artificial thing, the product of a

Christian civilisation now irremediably decayed? If we are to 'make contact with the masses', are we not right to want to bye-pass all this Byzantinism, and get back directly to the Gospel? Such an objection is extremely precious; it brings us round to our real starting point. Is spiritual exegesis in fact, as is suggested, a decadent product? Is its appearance in the Church a symptom of sclerosis? Does it really mark a relapse from the religion of the spirit, announced in the Gospel, into a laborious formalism, more Byzantine than Christian? When we talk of spiritual exegesis, especially if we dare to use the word 'allegory', our thoughts inevitably turn to Origen. Is he perhaps the villain of the piece? Has he in this connection bequeathed to the Church a fatal legacy of Hellenistic superstition? Porphyry, who ought to know, maintained that allegorical interpretation was merely a poor Christian camouflage of a technique which the last Pagan theologians practised to galvanise their own dying legends. Nor is it a new complaint from the Christian side. Already many of his contemporaries accused the great Alexandrian of substituting an over-subtle elaboration—in principle far more Pagan than Christian—for the simplicity of the Gospel. And what did he reply? They confronted him with the Gospels and the Apostles, but he himself did not hesitate to refer his opponents back to the same source, and if we read his arguments without prejudice, we must recognise their cogency. Erasmus, whose mind was little inclined to idle speculation, declared himself convinced by them. Moreover, if we turn to the Gospel itself, as we are adjured to do, we cannot fail to be impressed by the use made there of this method of interpretation. When our Lord, speaking of John the Baptist, declares, 'Elias is already come' (Mt. xvii, 12), or, speaking of himself and his resurrection, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh a sign but a sign shall not be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet' (Mt. xii, 39), what is it but allegorical exegesis? And when the risen Christ at Emmaus, 'going back to Moses and the whole line of prophets, began to interpret the words used of himself by all the Scriptures' (Lk. xxiv, 27) it is difficult to make sense of the phrase and its whole context in any other way.

It seems clear in any case, that it was in this way that the first Christian generation did understand the relation established by Christ himself between the Old Testament on the one hand, and his own person and work on the other. The Apostolic utterances in the Acts, archaic as they are in tone, leave no doubt at all about it. And if we look at the quotations from the Old Testament placed by St Matthew beside every word and act of the Saviour that he recounts, we shall be struck by the number of cases in which they would seem pointless if 'allegory' is to be rejected.

If we pass on to St Paul, the procedure becomes explicit. It would be easy to collect examples—('The Stone which was Christ', in I Cor. x, 4, after the exclamation of ix, 9; 'Doth God take care for oxen?' suggested by Deut. xxv, 4, or indeed in the Epistle to the Galatians, the whole parallel between Agar and Sarah)—but it is more to the point if we limit ourselves to his own actual declaration: 'It is we that were foreshadowed in these events' (I Cor. x, 6) he tells us after an allegorisation of the wanderings in the desert. Other Pauline texts go even further. Does not the idea of 'mystery', which plays so large a part in the Epistles of the Captivity, suggest the discovery of a new meaning given to the Scriptures, unifying all in Christ? When St Paul contrasts the Jews who only see 'the letter' in the Scriptures with the Christians who discover 'the spirit' in them, for whom a 'veil is lifted' when they read them, what does he mean by 'the letter that killeth', unless a purely literal interpretation of Scripture, whereas the 'spirit that giveth life' is precisely that spiritual interpretation we are discussing? The Epistle to the Hebrews completes the picture, being simply an allegorical explanation of the liturgy of the Tabernacle in relation to Christ on the Cross. And here it is no longer merely a case of more or less general parallels, but we are in the midst of those detailed applications which the modern mind finds most disconcerting in an Origen or his imitators.

When all this evidence is assembled—and it could be enriched indefinitely—we reach the point to which all those reformers who oppose the simplicity of the Gospel with the artifices of Tradition are bound to come in the end. A closer examination always shows the 'corruptions' attributed to tradition to be, in fact, an organic development from the Gospel.

II

But does that statement in itself betray a deeper uneasiness than might at first appear? If on this point, as on so many others, it is futile to oppose Church and Gospel, may not the fault lie in the Gospel itself? Even if it be true that from the outset Christianity has been presented as the fulfilment of Judaism, it is still possible that not only the Apostles, but even its divine Founder himself may have been mistaken. There is no doubt that our Lord's intention was 'not to destroy but to fulfil', but can his claim to do so be justified without doing violence to the meaning of the whole text of the Old Testament? It is an important problem; it raises the whole question of the relation between the Testaments, and our answer to it involves a judgment between the Church and Marcion, the second-century heretic who tried to separate Christianity altogether from Judaism.

Modern critics like Adolphe Harnack consider the condemnation of Marcion to have been the Church's first grave mistake; is it possible that they are right? Do not let us be too ready to believe so. The progress of scientific criticism itself in recent years makes it more and more difficult to maintain that view. In a word, the method of interpretation applied by the writers of the New Testament to the Old, different as it may be from our modern methods, seems less and less artificial, less of a *deus ex machina* brought in from the outside to satisfy the needs of the occasion.

In the first place, it is no novelty. Nothing is today more certain than the fact that this very method is integral to the Old Testament itself. The re-use and transformation of ancient stories, amounting sometimes to a metamorphosis, is seen now to be the secret of the composition of the Old Testament writings in their completed forms, and when one follows the process closely one realises how very far it is from artifice. According to the Fathers of the Church indeed it shows the effects of providential guidance. In this way, God has led the Israelite from a still primitive religion to one revived by prophetic vision, through revealing to him a deeper meaning in his original experience. Yet this fundamental transformation has nothing revolutionary in it; it is essentially organic, more like a biological germination; and we begin to understand how, in its turn, it has prepared the way for, and as it were provoked, a second complementary transformation, that from the Old Testament to the New.

And here we are at the heart of our problem. It is important not to hurry, but to go over all the facts point by point. The whole religious history of Israel as recounted in the Book of Moses and the Historical Books in their final form bears a dual stamp. On the one hand, we have religious traditions of which the nucleus at least is contemporary with the events recorded; on the other, it cannot be denied that this history has been re-interpreted, or to be more exact it is history in which a new meaning has been discovered. This is true of any of the 'documents', but it can be demonstrated specially clearly in the case of the so-called 'Deuteronomic' Books. There can be no question that in them the ancient history of Israel is coloured by the most original views of the prophets of the VIIIth and VIIth centuries; for example, the account of the Egyptian oppression and then the miraculous escape of the Exodus is seen in the light of a painful experience which Israel did not and could not have before the VIth century, namely the Babylonian exile and the deliverance by Cyrus, (while these events themselves bore a new, deeper meaning through the prophetic preaching which both preceded and accompanied them). An even more striking example is offered by the legislation in Deuteronomy, in

which a collection of Mosaic, or even pre-Mosaic, ordinances, purely sacral in their primitive meaning, has been re-interpreted at a later date in a humanitarian sense. In the Sapiential writings the process of transformation can be followed in detail. *Wisdom*, originally, in the most ancient collection of Proverbs, for instance, is merely a collection of practical aphorisms, a manual intended for court functionaries, borrowed with but little modification from the neighbouring monarchy. Only from the outset this very worldly wisdom found itself in a new atmosphere, that of the Jahveism of Israel, revived and purified by the first great prophets; and later, when the Exile had destroyed the earthly foundation in destroying the monarchy and its appurtenances, this wisdom detached itself without any effort from its material basis, and became a wisdom of supernatural life. Finally, as in the 'Wisdom of Solomon', 'Wisdom' has altogether lost its association with practical affairs and has become the deep impenetrable design of God, communicated to the faithful soul by grace.

The advantage of this last example is that it shows how natural the allegorisation has been. It is no arbitrary feat of exegesis but rather the slow and continuous action of a river hollowing out its bed in a soil, the possibilities of which are only gradually discovered. The same is true of the Biblical 'histories'; the philosophy of history, possibly post-exilic, which colours them, and it maybe transforms them, is by no means an external re-clothing but rather an irradiation rising up from the depths. The religious experience of the prophets which has illumined this history in retrospect is not itself an absolute beginning. However direct the call of God may have been to them, he would seem to have opened their eyes to the still undiscovered riches in the old tradition of Israel, rather than blur their sight with dim remembrance of strange visions. It is true that the prophets of the VIIth to the VIth centuries did fundamentally remould the old Jahveism, but they still remained its faithful heirs, and their most genuine creations carry on, not only its matter, but its whole spirit. It is through meditation on the history of their people that one and all have prepared themselves for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Think what Hosea owes to the accounts of the Exodus and the wanderings in the desert! (Hosea ii and ix). Does not Isaias's vision of the God of holiness, (which was the origin, not only of his vocation in time, but the principle of his whole prophetic message) clearly derive from the traditional liturgy of the Temple (Isaias, vi). And what would the hope of Jeremias or Ezekiel amount to without the underlying thought of the Covenant with Abraham, renewed on Horeb (Ezech. xxxvi, xxxvii)?

These last remarks bring us to a more definite point. The prophetic inspiration first takes the form of the illumination of a history long

well known, a history moreover which in its own development had already been turning towards that light, in which it is now bathed and renewed. But even in its most daring innovations the projected future is recomposed always from the elements of the past.

As has been well said, the task of the prophets was not only to prepare the passage from the clan to the religious community, the substitution for the people of God which was merely a people of flesh, a people of God assembled by the Holy Spirit which is the Church, but to make this passage, this substitution, inevitable.

Ezekiel's lyrical description of the future city of God and his Sanctuary is clearly drawn from the traditional source of Zion and the temple of Solomon. It is true that everything is changed; the atmosphere is eschatological; the character and the details of the vision seem hardly meant to apply to this earth such as we know it. But the Prince, more priest than warrior, who is to reign there, though he seems already like 'the priest of the order of Melchisedech', still bears the stamp of a 'Davidic'. What shall we say of the Universal City sung of in the second part of *Isaias*? There is certainly not much of the old Jerusalem about it, much more of the 'Spouse of the Lamb' descended from Heaven, yet it is *through* the ancient city the new is seen. Could we not say that it is from the ancient stones that the new city is to be rebuilt?

. . . Scalpri salubris ictibus,
Et tunsione plurima,
Fabri polita malleo? . . .

(To be continued)

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Translated by ROSALIND MURRAY.