

Commentary

THE LIMITS OF HOPE

When Cardinal Newman remarked that 'the right rule is to hope nothing, to fear nothing, to expect nothing, to be prepared for everything' he was not of course speaking of the certitude of Christian hope whose object is God and the grace and glory that are his alone to give. He was in effect giving expression to what has become a semantic difficulty: the hope of which we usually speak is a limited expectation of what the future will bring, and our experience is often enough of human hopes confounded or at least deferred. And the word we use, whether with a capital letter to distinguish it or not, to speak of the theological virtue that is infallibly certain, itself takes on the hesitant quality of a question whose answer is not sure.

It is plain that the earlier secular hopes of happiness have largely been disappointed. The growth of education, the removal of the grosser social injustices, the increased opportunities for leisure: it was too easily assumed that these would create a sense of purpose in the community, would remove the major causes of conflict and misery and crime. It has not happened so, and the disillusionment that marks the political life of this country nowadays must surely reflect this sense of failure. So much was promised, so much indeed achieved, and yet the elusive hopes have somehow failed to be realized.

Christians need feel no satisfaction that the secular assumptions have proved to be so shallow. There are publicists indeed who seem to be glad that their prophecies have proved true, even at the cost of unhappiness and manifest failure. And there is a sort of political argument that introduces a moral support only to further a purely political advantage. No party is exempt from the temptation to make a selective use of religious sanctions to mask its own devices. And the appeal to authority at one extreme or to compassion at the other can only be valid if it is subordinated to the hope that lies hereafter. It can seem to be contracting out of political responsibility—and certainly it must limit the promises on which politicians thrive—to say that no amount of social legislation or economic advance can of themselves make men happy. But it may be the beginning of a true political wisdom. Certainly the weariness, of young people especially, at the very mention of politics, the cynicism with which they regard the ambitious manoeuvres of the

professionally engaged, might be warnings that those who promise too much can become the sort of confidence tricksters who end by never being trusted at all.

Christian hope, the belief that human happiness can at last only be achieved by trusting in the providential will of God, is not a speculative luxury. It has its context in the work of man's redemption which the Church exists to renew each day. It may be that the sense of frustration and even of despair can have their meaning here. Human hope has so largely been betrayed, it seems: what is there left to support the sense of man's need, to assure him that there is indeed a beatitude to enjoy? The unbeliever, and the reluctant believer no less: they have the right to ask the question.

At Easter the Christian answer is made plain. The theme is articulated in the weeks of waiting, when suffering and death, ignominy and failure, have their necessary place. The events are a matter of history: they happened—but they happen still. For the human situation which the work of redemption assumes is not simply a Palestinian episode to remember. It is enacted in the experience of every man and woman—the pain and its purpose, the failure and its providence, the hope defeated and the hope fulfilled.

At what may seem very different levels the articles in this issue of *BLACKFRIARS* are a commentary on this single theme. The awakened understanding of the mystery of the Resurrection exemplified in Father Durrwell's recent book is surely an example of that living theology—to be realized in human experience and related to human needs—for which Cardinal Newman pleaded. And the deepening crisis of our time demands a profounder awareness of what the Christian profession may demand in terms of resistance to evil—a resistance, it may be, that can only rely on the weapons of non-violence, since they alone can seem commensurate with the cause we serve. Within the framework of industrial relations, no less, there are limits to what political action can achieve if human liberty—and indeed the Christian understanding about man—is to be preserved.

The point at which a human hope touches the hope that is Christian and endures is never easy to mark, and to make it have meaning in our present society is harder still. But this is precisely the work of the Church in the world: not to reject man's efforts but in the end to indicate the limits that are necessarily theirs.