

LIFE FROM THE DEAD<sup>1</sup>

IN the material order, a man owns whatever he keeps; in the spiritual order, however, we own what we give away. The grace of election, given us so freely, is not bestowed upon us as if we were alone in the world, and without neighbours in sight; citizenship in the Kingdom of God is granted us that we may share it. No one can be a Catholic who is not a missionary at heart, who does not wish, pray, and work that all may be one in the Lord. And of all the apostolates, that to Israel is not the least. Her return to Christ is the last particular intention of our Octave, because it will be near the end of ages that the whole of the people comes to him. But though last in time, it is by no means last in rank.

The Church of Christ is the Israel of old, prolonged and extended—nay, renewed in youth like the eagle, enriched and fulfilled. 'We are the House of Israel. We are Israel, the vineyard of the Lord,' says an early Christian writer, (Pseudo Ambrosius, s. 58, n. 2; P.L. 17; 723) And another calls Abraham 'the Father of the Church.'<sup>2</sup> St Augustine goes further; he makes the Church speak: 'When God blessed Abraham, it was I he promised. The blessing of Christ, I am indeed spread through all the nations.' (De Fide Rerum, 5; P.L. 40, 174) Each year, on Holy Saturday, before the blessing of the baptismal font, the Church herself remembers that in the Christian eon the miracles of old shine anew, and that what God's mighty arm wrought when he freed from the yoke of Egypt the One People, he works now for the Gentiles in the waters of regeneration. And with upraised arms she implores of him: 'Grant, therefore, that all the world be lifted up to the sonship of Abraham and the dignity of Israel.' (Collect after 4th Prophecy). Now if we are the true, spiritual Israel, must it not be our anxious desire to see the Israel according to the flesh enter the Church, which is—it cannot be too often repeated—Abraham's tent, now wide as earth and heaven, the City of David, infinitely more glorious than before? Holding in a new way the ancient privileges of God's people, do we not wish to share with Israel bereaved the treasures of the New Dispensation? Indeed, this is why we have gathered here tonight.

The mysteries of the Jewish people—their election, failure, and hope—are most intimately connected with the centre of our faith. Were we to ignore the Advent, the faith and fervour of Patriarchs and Prophets, we should lose sight of the Gospel as fulfilment. And were we to cast aside

1. Sermon delivered for the Church Unity Octave, 1948, at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, D.C.

2. Diodor of Tarsus. Cf. Deconinck, *Essai sur le chaine de l'octauique* (Paris, 1912), p. 112.

the Church's great expectation, the firm and ardent belief of the Jewish people in Christ, we should rob Christianity of its victory. Men like Marcion, who wish to 'free' the Church of her Jewish antecedents, change Christianity from the *one* story, the universal drama, to just a pretty tale, Christ's coming from the focus of history to merely one of its events. Men like Luther, on the other hand, who deny that Christ will in the end capture the minds and hearts of his people, or men who forget that the Jews will be offered another chance—a chance they will surely grasp—empty history of its solace: that it is a Divine Comedy, that it has a great and happy ending. They despoil us of St Paul's comfort that God has abandoned to their unbelief all men—first the Gentiles, then the Jews—only to include them all in his pardon, and show them his mercy (Rom. 11,32); that he has left them to their rebellion that his love may triumph.

The mysteries of Israel are intimately connected with the centre of our faith. The New Testament speaks of them again and again, but where do we find them mentioned most explicitly? When does St John, for instance, say: 'He came into his own, and his own received him not' (John, 1, 11)? When does St Peter call: 'Let all the House of Israel know beyond a doubt that God has made both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts, 2, 36)? And when does St Paul stress that Israel's blindness is not total, not final?

It is in the beginning of his Gospel, when he speaks of the Logos-made-Flesh, that St John calls the Jews Christ's own. From them, from Mary Immaculate, he took his flesh, his royal body, his fair and conquering countenance. Through his Incarnation, the people and the land of Palestine have become, as it were, the 'Fifth Gospel'. It is into their lives and customs that his life, transcending time, is woven, so that their vineyards and acres, their rivers and hills, their villages and their Holy City, have become part of our world. The little boat of Simon Peter, that could be seen so often on the waters of Genesareth, has become the Ship of the Universal Church. And her bountiful hands, holding the Sacraments, are filled with Palestine's fruits: the wheat of Galilee, the wine of Judea, the oil of Jerusalem. There, among the Jews, the Church, though divine, was born. But St John cannot tell the Good News, that Christ came into his own, without correcting our joy with the sad tidings that his own received him not, in his woe resounding the Lamentations of Jeremias the Prophet. With John and Jeremias we must see Israel's failure as part of the drama of divine love, which, having bent down to man, sought him, gone after him, and been refused, is still asking.

In St John's Gospel the mysteries of Israel are linked to the Incarnation. And St Peter announces to the men of Israel the Lordship of Jesus the same morning the Holy Ghost descended upon the little Church in the

Cenacle. And shortly after, in the very spring of the Church, when her fellowship and her power had become manifest and Peter had made the lame leap, he pleads with his brethren to repent and be converted, that the times of refreshment may come (Acts 3, 19-20). For how should the works of the Spirit cover the earth, how its face be renewed (Ps. 103, 30), if Israel, Heaven's first custodian on earth, denies herself to Christ? How should Isaias's prophecies on the peace of the Messianic Kingdom come true to their fullest and ultimate measure, how should the waters break forth in the desert and the streams in the wilderness, how the parched land become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water (Isai. 35, 6-7)? How should the swords be made into ploughshares and the spears into sickles (*id.* 2, 4)? How shall wolf and lamb, calf and lion, dwell together, and how a little child lead them (*id.* 11, 6)? How shall Love rule, if the people whom the Lord guided, on whom he lavished his affection, keeps aloof from his Christ? Therefore St Peter pleads with his people, uniting his plea with Christ's prayer of pardon on the Cross for those who wished him ill. The Apostle takes pains to make loud the quiet words Christ spoke to his Father, words of forgiveness that Peter himself had missed, words that few had heard and many too readily forget. So he says: 'Come then, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers' (Acts 3, 17).

Let me say again what to my mind stresses the theological import of Israel's mysteries: the place they have in Scripture. St John's recognition of Israel's prerogative and his sorrow over her defection are embedded in his Prologue, in which he praises the Only-begotten of the Father. St Peter's pleading is in the second and third chapters of the *Acts*, following on the Pentecostal wind that stormed over Jerusalem. And similarly, St Paul's assurance that Israel will finally embrace Christ stands out in the Epistle which is the theological heart of the New Testament; it crowns the letter which outlines the history of salvation and proclaims its universality, lauds the gratuitousness of grace and God's incomprehensible judgments, his unsearchable ways. But to the Apostle Israel's denial of Christ is a deeply personal, an existential problem. Has God's promise proved futile? Is there injustice with God (Rom. 9, 6-14)? Has God cast off his people? he asks, and emphatically denies (Rom. 11, 1). Has he, as Apostle to the Gentiles, betrayed his kinsmen? With an oath unparalleled in its solemnity, he is able to answer that the sorrow of his heart never ends. No, he is not ashamed to bare his soul's anguish. Indeed, he is so moved, so stirred and stricken by Israel's separation from her and the world's Messiah that he desires the impossible. 'I would wish', he says, 'myself to be anathema from Christ for the sake of my brethren, who are my kinsmen according to the flesh' (Rom. 9, 1). He loves them because their blood

runs in his veins, but vastly more because they are the people God loves and whose blood he elected to flow through the heart of the Christ. St Paul knows full well that his wish cannot be granted, such a sacrifice not be made, but his helpless love seeks here an ultimate expression. Nonetheless the Apostle's wish to be anathema, forever separated from his Lord, is so astounding that even St Chrysostom says we shall never understand him, being so far from love like his.<sup>1</sup>

But we dare not give up the endeavour to read his soul, for only so trying will we attain a full and integrated vision of God's plan for the world, of the wondrous economy of salvation. This vision, and with it a Pauline grasp of the enigma of Israel, cannot be won, however, without a deep supernatural sense—I venture to say, without a mystic sense. We must long to love as the Apostle loves, for without his joy in all that happened when God walked with his people in a pillar of fire or cloud, without his sorrow that Israel is isolated from God-made-Man, without his yearning that she turn to him, our religious life lacks a dimension. Our faith shrinks, one of our heartstrings withers. Perhaps you may smile and discount what I say, suspecting me of personal bias. You may think I have succumbed to the common temptation to exaggerate the importance of an ideal close to one's heart. You may think that, as a convert, I plead the special interests of a group, the Jewish people. True, I do not deny that their spiritual welfare means much to me, but it is not first the need of the Jews that makes me say: Without Pauline vision and love, a heart-string withers. It is rather that Christ wants his people.

Pius XII, in his encyclical on the Mystical Body, has taught us that Christ, the Head, needs the Church, his Body; that he requires his members; that he wishes their help, not from any weakness, but from a superabundance of strength and love.<sup>2</sup> May we not, though in a sense different from the Holy Father's, say that Christ 'needs' the Jews for the fullness of his Mystical Body and for the ultimate sanctification of the world, that he needs them because he wills to need? Mother Julian of Norwich speaks of the love-longing of Christ for his redeemed,<sup>3</sup> and Father Gerald Vann, asking how there can be longing in Christ Glorified, answers that he desires them as the soul in glory longs for the resurrection of the body.<sup>4</sup> May we not likewise say that because of his never-ending love, Christ greatly desires those who are, in a special manner, his bone and flesh? He desires them, he desires their conversion, through the Church. On Good Friday, moved by their blindness, she prays that the veil which covers their hearts may be withdrawn. She speaks of them with great tenderness

1. In Rom., Hom. 16, 2; PG 60: 551.

3. *Revelations of Divine Love*, chap. 63.

2. C.T.S. Edition §44.

4. *The Pain of Christ and the Sorrow of God*. (Blackfriars)

and delicacy, but unfortunately, the gentleness of her prayer is at times obscured in translation.<sup>1</sup> On the Feast of Christ the King, she asks that the Blood of the Saviour may be to them a laver, a fountain, of redemption and of life. And as Christ wooed them in the loving parables spoken to the people, but no less in the disputes with the Pharisees; as he wooed them when he taught in Temple and Synagogue, but even more when he prayed on the Cross, so he wishes now to draw them near, through our intercession and labour.

It is Christ's desire that first compels us to intercede and to labour, and then we will be truly moved by the need of our Jewish brethren—today greater than ever. Few realise the harm Hitler has done them. Not only did he kill most cruelly a third of the people, but he wounded many who survive. They are haunted by his abuse, his hatred and brutality, by the fear and anxiety he begot. They cannot forget, they cannot unburden their hearts. In this world, they see no hope, no comfort, and too often at their shoulder leers the grim visage of despair. Many events in and concerning Palestine, and other things that are disturbing, such as the strange sympathy some Jews have for Communism, cannot be understood unless they are seen as signs of desperation. And how shall they find comfort and peace, hope and courage to life, if not through Christ? And how shall they find Christ unless he is preached to them—preached by our lives and words, preached by our love? God alone knows the many who have been kept from Christ and the Church by lukewarm and half-hearted Christians. God alone knows the many who have been repelled by anti-Semitism, which is one guise of the fear to deliver oneself wholly to Christ, and a falling back into paganism. When we pray for the conversion of Jews, we must also pray for the conversion of those who yield to anti-Semitism, who are, if they be Christians, reluctant Christians; we must pray that those outside the Fold may have faith, and those within, love.

Were we to do more to bring Christ to the people solitary and like a widow weeping, afflicted and without rest (Lam. 1, 1-3), many would find him. In New York just now, there is an exhibition of French tapestries, depicting, among other things, the life of the Blessed Virgin, and of St Stephen, and scenes from the Apocalypse. They are a concert of colour, a meeting of beauty; they are woven harmony. They speak of the glad giving and devotion to the whole of each of many weavers. They speak, above all, of faith. Overwhelmed by these impressions, a Jewish physician said to one of his patients, a friend of mine gravely ill: 'Really, they could make me a Catholic'. But I fear that he will not have the courage to take himself seriously. And will there be anyone to interpret for him this in-

1. Cf. 'Pro Perfidis Judaeis,' *Theological Studies* VIII, 1 (March 1947), pp. 80-96.

spiration of grace? It is hard for someone born, as it were, into the faith to know the courage and support needed for a conversion.

The other day a Jewish college girl who was so fortunate as to have this support came to the rectory. She was led by two friends, for she had been blind from birth. She had that gentleness so marked in blind people, and the same eagerness that cried: 'Lord, that I may see!' (Mk. 10, 51). She told me of her search for truth, of her love for Christ's Gospel, but also of the obstacles her family put in her way. Never in her life had she seen a Church, but her friends had spoken to her about the House of God and its tower pointing towards heaven. When about to leave, she turned and said—and it was at once literal and symbolic: 'Do you know, Father, what I would like to do? I wish I could touch the church steeple with my hands, to feel what it is like.' All her longing, and the longing of many Jews, was in her wish to touch the tower stretching up towards Infinite Light. You would again have looked into many Jewish hearts and seen the longing in them, could you have heard with me the admission of a Jewish writer. She is also the wife of a writer whose books have been read by millions. As a Zionist she hopes to spend the eve of her life in Palestine. Just a few days ago, she said to me: 'With every day that passes, I become more of a Hebrew. But when I want to rest in the arms of God I go to a Catholic Church.'

I have spoken of the longing of many, but there are some few who have gone further and, by the grace of God, found their goal. On the Eve of Epiphany, when the Church remembers the Baptism of our Lord, I had the joy of baptizing John, a young friend of mine. He had grown up in a typically modern atmosphere, but at college, reading Plato, he felt, for the first time and overwhelmingly, the Presence of God in the soul. Two years later, a Catholic acquaintance introduced him to the works of Jacques Maritain. He also read some of St John of the Cross. This and other reading turned his mind to the Church, so that after his service in the Navy, he began his graduate studies in philosophy at a Catholic university. He had found more and more that without God there was no reason to oppose Nazism, no reason not to make the State omnipotent and absolute, and he saw that either God existed or nothing was true or beautiful, but all deceptive. However, these thoughts would not have brought him into the Church had it not been for the living example of his Catholic friends. The flame of faith was enkindled when he saw, at the university, a fellow-student kneeling, absorbed in prayer. And one of the most important days in his conversion was when he read what so many carelessly glanced over: the story of the hanging of two British soldiers by terrorists last July, near Nathanya in Palestine. Instantly he realised that the Jews are—that man is—lost without Christ; he felt the

crying need for the redemption of Israel. But the decisive moment was his discovery—I quote his own words—‘that Christ wanted us, was in agony for our conversion and our life with him. At that moment I knew that I was obligated to enter the Church, for his sake.’

Present at his baptism were a few young people in their twenties. There was Michael, whom John met in the Navy. He was the first to shake his liberal views on the Bible, the first to say to him that it might be true. Much later they discovered that, independently of one another, they had found Christ. Michael was baptized last fall, and wonders now if Christ calls him to the priesthood. After he had entered the Church one of his Jewish friends said to him—it is an argument dulled by too much use—that he had become a Catholic because he was unstable, and because he was impressed by the strong personalities of Catholics he knew. He answered: ‘Indeed, my weakness, and not my strength, saved me. I *was* unstable, for I found nothing to be stable about. I *was* impressed by the sanity, the cleanliness and warmth, of certain Catholics. Through them I began to see the Church, and through the Church, Jesus Christ.’ Some time ago Michael said to me: ‘Israel expected a Messias who would conquer the world—and they weren’t so wrong after all. He *has* conquered the world, but they don’t know it.’

Another of the happy company that rejoiced with John at the font was Catherine, who had been his classmate in high school. But they had lost sight of each other till just recently when they met again by chance. At the age of thirteen, Catherine became interested in the Church through a Catholic who seemed to have the answer to her own wonderings about God and the universe. She even went to Mass for a while, but then for years her attention was diverted by many other concerns. In her first year of college, however, a teacher read from Plato’s *Dialogues*. She borrowed the book, and while reading the *Phaedrus*, there was a sudden light that re-awakened in her the spirit of love she had known before. She had a hard struggle, for the people who surrounded her saw in religion, she says, ‘an outlet’, ‘a blind’, ‘an escape’—anything but the Reality. She bought a Missal, and all on her own, laboured till she understood the Mass. She read the Bible and some of St Augustine behind the covers of the *New Yorker*. But it took her years till she asked for instruction, and again some time till—I’m using her own words—she was ready to give up everything for Everything, and was baptized two years ago on her birthday, a beautiful reminder that Israel was born for Christ, that he was the purpose of her creation.

In the group of John’s many friends was another convert, Mary, who had grown up in the same neighbourhood as he. Her story is in a way the strangest, because it shows that God at times uses for his purpose what

is in no way intended to serve him. She had always been pursued by the need for Christ, though for a long time she had succeeded in suppressing even the least stirrings of this desire. She had been struck also by the fact that the many arguments against the Church contradicted one another. But humanly speaking she would never have moved towards Christ had grace not drawn her by the thinnest possible cord. She met a Catholic who praised beyond all measure the wisdom of the Church, but in no way lived up to his faith. To prove him illogical, she read the New Testament; later, the letters of St Augustine, some of Newman, Pascal, Chesterton, till one day she felt it imperative to know more about Catholic teaching, and much against her will, asked for instruction. There she found that she simply could not escape truth. After much wrestling she decided on Palm Sunday, 1944, to ask for baptism. Palm Sunday is the day the Church recalls that the Hebrew children, announcing the resurrection of life with palm branches, cried out: 'Hosanna in the highest', the day she sings: 'He is the Redemption of Israel. . . . Fear not, O daughter of Sion; behold thy King cometh to thee!'<sup>1</sup>

These and other friends gathered around John on the Eve of Epiphany as the cleansing water flowed over his forehead. Every conversion is an Epiphany, a manifestation of God in the darkness, a victory and witness of grace, a bursting of the clay fetters of the busy-ness of everyday. But the conversion of a Jew is something special. 'How is this possible?' you may ask. 'Is not the message of Christianity that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female", that "all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3, 28)?' Indeed, this is the message. It would be a grave error to imply that a Jewish Christian is in any way better than a Gentile Christian, or nearer the Kingdom of God. Still, the conversion of a Jew, his turning to Christ, is something special.

Israel rejected him because she wanted to keep apart from the Gentiles and not share her privileges, because the flesh—in the Biblical sense—revolted against the spirit. Alas! in Israel's sin, your sin and mine are projected on the vast screen of the world. However, when a member of the House of Israel turns to Christ, her sin is repudiated, thrust away. Then, in a particular manner, the flesh humbles itself to the spirit, and rises as if in the resurrection; the body returns, as it were, to the soul, their harmony restored and a greater foretold. In a particular manner, then, God's fidelity is made visible, his word justified, and the one-ness of man proclaimed. When a Jew becomes a Christian, the final winning of all Israel is foreshadowed, the great moment for which God has kept a special shower of gifts, for which he has saved a rain of grace, so that St Paul says their return will mean '*vita ex mortuis*, life from the dead' (Rom. 11, 15).

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1. Procession on Palm Sunday.