

Scripture Words—III: Holiness, Justice, Truth and Grace

LEONARD JOHNSTON

HOLINESS

'Holiness' seems to be the term we would choose in preference to any other to denote moral perfection in its highest and most general form; a holy man is one distinguished by the practice of outstanding virtue.

For this reason it is important to note that in the Bible holiness is not used primarily of men at all, but of God; and in God it is not first of all a moral quality so much as a quality of his being. (This is not to say that Israel's idea of God was ever divorced from morality, or that the Bible was ever concerned with a philosophical definition of God like the Greek First Cause. That, I hope, will become clear in what follows. But it does mean that the Bible is not so anxiously concerned with morality, especially human morality, as we are inclined to be).

The root of the word 'holiness' means 'cut off'. It denotes, then, that which was most immediately striking to the Israelites—that their God was 'different', cut off from anything which fell within their normal experience: he was not, in other words, like the pagan idea of god—something involved in or part of the world in which we live. It is difficult to say exactly what our God is, but at least we can say what he is not—he is not merely part of creation. He is outside it, beyond it, supremely above it. Holiness denotes, then, what we would mean by transcendence. But that is a very philosophical notion. For the Bible, it was rather an attitude to God: an attitude of awe and adoration and of almost sacred terror: 'Let all nations praise his great and fearful name, for holy is he and mighty . . . praise Yahweh our God, bow down before his holy mountain; for holy is Yahweh our God' (Ps. 98. 3, 5, 9). It is the attitude of Israel at the foot of mount Sinai: they cowered in terror at the foot of the mountain and would not so much as set foot on it, while on the mountain top, veiled in smoke, the voice of Yahweh rolled in thunder. The fire on this mountain, too, was a fitting symbol of their holy God: fearful, unapproachable, though at the same time a beacon of light and a centre of warmth to which they were irresistibly attracted.

For terror and desire were both implied by the notion of holiness. To say that God is supremely above and outside the world does not mean that he is completely cut off from the world, infinitely remote from it. On the contrary, he is thus supreme precisely because creation is bound to him by the closest of all possible ties, the tie that binds a mother to her child. The holy God is the God on whom creation depends utterly: 'You send forth your spirit and they are created; you hide your face and they fade away, take back your breath and these cease to be' (Ps. 103. 29 f).

Creation in fact is precisely the means by which the hidden, holy God becomes manifest: '... that they may see and know that the hand of Yahweh has done this, the Holy One of Israel created it' (Is. 41. 20). It is for his glory—glory is the external, visible correlative of the internal secret holiness: 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Hosts: heaven and earth are full of thy glory' (Is. 6. 3). That is why God is a jealous God: he alone is creator, for him alone all exists, 'and my glory I will not give to another' (Is. 42. 8). 'I am Yahweh without equal, I make the light, I make the dark . . . Lift up your eyes and see: who was it made the stars? And who could you imagine would be my equal, says the Holy One' (Is. 45. 7; 40. 25 f).

The whole of creation is for God's glory; but in token of this, certain portions of it are set aside more particularly for his glory, and these become, like the Holy God, 'cut off', separate, removed from the rest of creation. Thus the Temple is a 'temnos', a place cut-off, surrounded by successive areas of restriction up to the Holy of Holies which is reserved for God alone. The priests are dedicated to his service, and they too are removed from the profane life of the nation—they have not, for example, a tribal territory, for the Lord himself alone is their portion. And indeed the whole nation of Israel is set aside among all the nations of the world for the glory of God—a people apart, a holy race. The whole world is from God and for God, but this is particularly true of Israel: 'I am Yahweh, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your king' (Is. 43. 15): 'the Holy One, who fashioned Israel' (Is. 43. 11).

Holiness, then, means God's supremacy above the world, and his total and absolute dominion over his world. Any transgression on his 'separatedness', any limitation of his total rights is infringement of his holiness—and that is sin. This is where the moral connotation of holiness enters in. For sin is essentially nothing else than failure to acknowledge God's supreme dominion; an attempt to use creation as if

it were our own; it is claiming the knowledge of good and evil, the right to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong, to make ourselves the masters of our fate.

Such transgression cannot but be fatal—as when Uzza touched the ark of God's holiness, and died for his transgression (1 Sam. 6. 4). God's holiness is like a fire, and fire burns whoever comes too close: 'The light of Israel will become a fire, and the Holy One a flame, consuming and devouring' (Is. 10. 17).

But this fire is not merely destructive; it is also purifying; its object is not the sinner but his evil, and the anger of God's outraged majesty blazing forth is meant to purge away evil, 'as gold is refined by fire' (cf. 1 Pet. 1. 7); and after it is over, 'what remains is a holy seed' (Is. 6. 13). And the same is true of the holy nation, too. The oppression of Israel by the great powers is indeed a purification of the nation; but as far as these other peoples are concerned, it is 'blasphemy'—it is a failure to acknowledge that Israel is set aside; to reduce Israel to slavery or to treat them as vassals subject to a conqueror's will is like Uzza touching the ark, like profanation of the Holy Place. Therefore this action too will incur the blazing anger of God: 'Assyria will fall by the sword: this is the word of God whose fire is on Sion' (Is. 31. 9), and Israel will rejoice to know that 'great in the midst of them is the Holy One of Israel' (Is. 12. 6). Thus, in Second Isaiah in particular, the idea of the Holy God is almost inseparably joined with the idea of the Redeeming God: 'Fear not, Jacob, poor worm: I come to thine aid, the Holy One of Israel, thy Redeemer' (Is. 41. 14); 'I am the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: Egypt I give for thy ransom . . .' (Is. 43. 3); 'Thus speaks Yahweh, the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel: kings and princes will pay thee homage, for the sake of the Holy One of Israel who chose thee' (Is. 49. 7); 'Thus speaks Yahweh, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: I will show the road where lies salvation' (Is. 48. 17).

And so holiness which implies primarily the ineffable majesty of God, comes to have a moral connotation because of the absolute claims of that majesty, and comes finally to include also the idea of redemption, when those violated claims shall be restored.

JUSTICE

The terrifying majesty of God restoring his glory is often described in the psalms as a judgment scene. In psalm 95, for example, many of the ideas we have already mentioned are found in this context of

judgment: 'Great is Yahweh, and greatly to be praised, fearful above all gods . . . For Yahweh made the heavens, splendour and majesty go before him . . . Let all peoples bring glory to his name . . . Let all the world rejoice before Yahweh, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth, to judge the world with justice'.

But justice in such a context cannot mean merely that God has every right to condemn those who have sinned. In fact, throughout the Bible, justice does not have quite that sense which it has in moral theology, the virtue that leads us to give every man his rights.

The older English translation of this word is 'righteousness'; this has unpleasant connotations of 'self-righteousness', but it does at least suggest the correct idea, which is simply 'rightness'. A person is just if he is in the right, not necessarily in the moral sense but merely factually. For example, God says of Cyrus the Persian that 'I have raised up my just one from the east' (Is. 42. 1); and because of the context many commentators are inclined to take this in the sense of successful, victorious. A just weight, similarly, is not one which gives the buyer his due but simply one which is in accordance with a fixed standard—it is the 'right' weight.

This quality is first seen in creation itself. God 'ordered all things in measure and number and weight' (Wis. 11. 20). It was harmonious and well-ordered; it was the reverse of that chaos which ruled before God created.

Among all creation, God made man 'upright'; and to guide him in the right way, he gave a law—a law which was, like creation itself, the expression of the harmony and order which God intended. Thus psalm 18 can begin as a praise of God in creation ('The heavens declare the glory of God'), and move on to a praise of the law without any feeling of incongruity. The law expresses in the moral order the harmony which God had expressed on the physical order in creating. The law is often called 'the justice of God' in the sense that it is the expression of his plan for the right-ordering of the world. So also, if man follows this 'justice' which the law expresses he is in harmony with God and creation: 'Say to the just man: All is well . . . but there is no peace for the wicked' (Is. 3. 10; 57. 21); and perfect harmony in all creation is the work which Isaiah sees coming from the King of Justice (Is. 11. 5-9).

Justice, therefore, is the quality of rightness and perfect order which is characteristic of God. Sin disrupts this; and the same quality of justice is seen in God's action to restore it, an action which is both

anger and mercy. Anger, when 'the God of vengeance rises up to judge the earth, to give the proud their meed' (Ps. 93. 1); 'A fire goes before him, devouring all his rivals; the mountains melt away like wax before the Lord of all the earth, and the heavens proclaim his justice' (Ps. 96. 3-6). But justice means mercy too: 'With justice he will judge the humble folk, and save the poor' (Ps. 71. 4); 'When I cry out you answer me, God who gives me justice: have pity on me, hear my prayer' (Ps. 4. 2). Justice, the justice of God, does not mean merely giving every man his rights. It means making him right with God, giving him a share in his own rightness; to which no man has any right. 'For all have sinned, all have lost the glory of God; but they are justified by his grace' (Rom. 3. 24).

TRUTH

The right order which is the implication of justice is also the real order; or, in the Bible, truth. Truth for us is usually associated with 'telling the truth', honesty, candour; again, therefore, the moral quality is what seems to occur to us first, and especially the moral quality of men.

In the Bible, truth is again primarily a quality of God. We would be equally wrong, however, to swing to the other extreme and think of the metaphysical quality as philosophers expound it. The Bible is little concerned with abstract notions; and it is significant that the Greek metaphor for truth is 'light'—that which gives intellectual illumination; whereas the Hebrew is 'rock'—that which is firm and solid. The Hebrew is concerned with the practical effects of a quality; and to say that God is true means above all that he is reliable.

It is primarily a covenant term; God bound himself to Israel by covenant, made an agreement with them, an alliance. It was not a two-sided alliance, for they could have no claim on him that could possibly bind him to them. But God freely bound himself; he was not bound to accept conditions presented to him, but he made promises; and the guarantee of those promises was simply himself.

Truth, then, expresses the trustworthiness of God, his fidelity to his own pledged word, his rock-like reliability. The correlative term in man is 'faith'; reliance on God. And as firm as the basis of our faith is, so is our own confidence. 'If you do not stand fast, you will not hold fast', says Isaiah (7. 9), punning on two senses of the same word. With God, there is utter stability; without him, there is nothing firm.

But although the Hebrew does not think first in philosophical terms,

nevertheless it is true that this quality of God is nothing else than the expression of his own being. He is reliable, because he is real; and outside of him there is nothing. He is; his very name Yahweh means just this; the only 'gods' apart from Yahweh are precisely, as the Bible calls them, 'vanity'—emptiness, nothingness. To attempt to hold on to them is to grasp the empty air. And man too has no reality in himself, nothing except what he is by virtue of God's breath in him. Apart from that, what is he? The Bible struggles to find words to express the utter inanity of it: wax that melts before a little heat so that one cannot even tell the place where it fell; water that drops into the burning sand and leaves not a trace; a smoke that curls into the air and disappears even as you watch it.

Nothingness, emptiness: all except God. He alone is, he alone is real. To try to do without God is to walk in a world of one's own fantasy, a world of unreal shadows; to try to act without him is like planting one's foot on the ground only to find an empty chasm there. Whereas, God alone is real; God alone is reliable; God alone is faithful; God is True.

GRACE

God's truth is expressed in the covenant. But God did not have to make the covenant. This was for ever the most astounding factor in Israel's history—that God should thus freely, gratuitously, with no merit or reason of theirs, make them into his own people. It was indeed a complex of astonishing deeds: they were pitiful prisoners and he set them free; they were a rabble of runaway slaves and he made them into a nation; they were a nation like any other and he made them the People of God; and all of this he sealed in the covenant partnership.

God is faithful to his covenant; they know they can rely on him because of it. But that idea of faith is rarely used without being automatically coupled with this other even more striking quality, in the almost inseparable formula: *hesed we'emeth*, mercy and truth.

'Mercy' is not the best word for it, but it is difficult to find an appropriate word for this unique quality. It is gratuitous love, love that delights in giving, but most of all delights in giving where there is least there. It is a love that fills the hungry with good things, while the rich are sent empty away. It is a love which raises men up from the dunghill to be the princes of his people; a love which makes a barren, sterile woman into a happy mother (Ps. 112. 8 f; cf. Luke 1. 52 f).

It is a love that works in this way because this corresponds most

perfectly to God's nature and to ours. 'God is good', we say; but 'good' has two meanings which do not always overlap. A thing can be good for us in the sense that it is to our benefit; and a person can be good in the sense that he is kind and loving. But in God the two do coincide: he is everything that we need for our own good, for our happiness and delight; and he also desires supremely to give it. And we on our part are completely void of any good, coupled with a yearning need to be satisfied. His fulness reaches out to our emptiness; his goodness corresponds to our need; and his goodness will pour itself out most fully when our emptiness opens widest.

Mercy; love; loving-kindness; all these have been tried and do not quite succeed in conveying the meaning. Piety perhaps comes nearest, in the Latin sense of a father's gentle, prevenient, undemanding, loving care for his children. St Paul found the same difficulty when it came to convey the same quality in Greek; and the word he finally decided on was *agape*, which the Latin often translates as *caritas*, from which we have the English charity.

To read the Bible thus brings it home to us again how self-centred our religion is inclined to be, even in our anxious strivings after moral perfection, in our anguished scrutiny of our own conscience. True Christian morality, according to the Bible, both begins and ends with God. If we are holy, it is because the Lord our God is holy. Our justice is 'not ours, but the justice of God through faith' (Phil. 3. 9). Even our faith is merely the response to the fidelity of God. And most of all, this is true of our charity: 'It is not as if we first loved God' (1 Jn. 4. 10), but we love him with the love wherewith he loves us, with the love of God which is 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 5. 5).