

THE GOSPEL *of* Paul



BY MSGR RONALD KNOX



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Front cover image: *The Apostle Paul*, Wall painting, © 1340, Greco-Serbian - Church of the Ascension of Christ, Decani (former Yugoslavia) © akg-images. Background image: *3rd Century Papyrus of Pauline Epistles* (detail of Hebrews 10:22ff) courtesy of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland.

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Editor's note

St Paul's Gospel, First printing, March, 1950. This series of Lenten Conferences was preached by Msgr Ronald Knox in Westminster Cathedral on the Sunday Evenings in Lent 1950.

Msgr Knox's text has been left as first written, apart from the spelling of some Old Testament names, where the now more familiar forms have been substituted for those of the Latin Vulgate ("Noah" for "Noe", "Ishmael" for "Ismael" and so on). Quotations from scripture are taken from Msgr Knox's own translation. In a few places, he makes allusions and references that, today, may seem obscure; brief footnotes have been added where this seemed necessary.

The Pauline Approach

Our brother Paul, with the wisdom God has granted him, has written you a letter. (2 P 3:15)

When you have been looking at a child's picture-book, it may have occurred to you to wonder, before now, how the printer ever managed to transfer those brightly-coloured illustrations from the block to the paper. The process, of course, is not a simple one; in reality, there are three processes, and the page you are looking at has been three times through the press, receiving successively its tints of red, yellow and blue¹. So it is, if you come to think of it, about the knowledge you and I have of the basic facts of our religion; three different layers of evidence have been superimposed, one on the next. First, there is tradition. The earliest Christians learnt their faith by word of mouth; you and I, if God had so ordered our destiny, might still, after all these centuries, be learning our faith by word of mouth. Next, there are the holy Gospels; an account of our Lord's life deliberately composed, for your information and mine, by men who

¹ This refers to a now obsolete method of printing where different colours are overlaid one above the others.

had witnessed the events of it, or had lived so close to first-hand witnesses that the question of tradition hardly comes in. And finally, in the remaining books of the New Testament, you have a set of documents, mostly in the form of letters, written during the lifetime of men who had seen our Lord. They don't set out to give us a course of religious instruction, but they are all the better as evidence for that. We learn from such writers in the course of conversation (as it were) how Christian people lived and thought in that first age, an age lit up by the afterglow of our Lord's own life on earth.

Leave out the four Gospels, and most of the New Testament comes to us from the mind of one man, St Paul. I say 'from the mind' not 'from the hand', because St Paul didn't usually write, he dictated. And you can trace his influence, no doubt, in the writings of other men who derived their inspiration from him. The Acts of the Apostles was written, not by St Paul, but by his friend St Luke; yet I think it is clear that St Paul must have encouraged him to write it, and supplied him with a good deal of his material. What shall we say of the Epistle to the Hebrews? The Church holds by the tradition that it was, in some sense, the work of St Paul, but the style of it differs noticeably from that of his acknowledged epistles. Must we suppose that, this time, he wrote with his own hand, wrote carefully, as a man writes when he is working out a thesis, instead of blurting out the thoughts

of his pregnant mind, as he did to the stenographer? Or is it possible that he drew up a skeleton of the things he wanted said, and left some trusted disciple, Silvanus or another, to clothe it in his own words?² Be that as it may, for our present purposes we will not use either the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistle to the Hebrews except here and there, by way of illustration. We will build up our picture of St Paul's Gospel from those vivid, personal letters of his, thrown off in the heat of the moment to the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, and to one or two of his immediate friends.

I want to study St Paul's letters in isolation, forgetting for the moment that we have any Christian tradition, any Gospel narrative, to supplement them. So, I imagine, you might get the printer to give you a pull-off of that childish picture all in blue, with the yellows and the reds left out. I want you to see what an admirable blue-print you can get, even so, of the Christian world-picture, simply from listening to what St Paul has to tell us. It is rather like listening to one side of a telephone conversation; we can only guess, as we go along, what the people at the other end of the wire have been saying. Our pattern will be all built up out of bits and pieces, just fragments of talk

² Most Catholic Biblical scholarship now accepts that Hebrews is not by St Paul; there is no consensus about its likely author, but clearly he had some connexion with St Paul and his teaching.

overheard, sparks struck from the anvil of forgotten controversies, and problems that have no meaning for us now. But we shall see, already, the outlines of our Christian world-picture etched in for us, and with a firm hand, by a man who is not thinking about us or our difficulties; he is just talking to his friends.

It is an extraordinary thing, if you come to think of it, how the account of our Lord which you get in the Gospels dovetails in with the account of him you get in the epistles. Not in the sense that the two accounts agree; that would be natural, that would be commonplace; rather in the sense that they disagree. I don't mean that they contradict one another; I mean that the things on which St Paul concentrates his attention are things upon which, apparently, the Evangelists do not concentrate attention, and vice versa. After all, ask anybody in the world who has heard of Jesus Christ to tell you what kind of Man he was. You will be told, at once, that Jesus Christ went about the world doing good, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and so on. There is no word of that in St Paul; with him, the whole of our Lord's earthly biography passes unnoticed. Watch him, for example, when he is recommending to the Philippians the virtue of humility (*Ph 2:5 sqq.*). You would expect him to remind them how our Lord was born in a stable, his Mother a peasant; how he lived as a poor man, how he died as a common criminal. But it isn't, you find, our Lord's behaviour as

Man that he appeals to for his illustration; it is the condescension of our Lord in becoming Man at all. Always he misses the opportunity of telling us a story, the story of the greatest Man who ever lived.

Again, think how much space is occupied in all the Gospels by long extracts from what our Lord said. Very probably, even before the Gospels were written, there were collections of such sayings handed on to the faithful by word of mouth. How often does St Paul quote the words of his Master? In the epistles, never; only once in a speech recorded in the Acts, and then it is a saying which the Gospels haven't preserved for us at all (*Ac* 20:35). Think of it, here was the whole Sermon on the Mount at his disposal; here was St Luke at his elbow, writing our Lord's biography, and never once does St Paul reinforce his own authority by pointing to the things Christ said! What a lot of our Lord's teaching was devoted to showing the Jews they could no longer claim a monopoly of the Divine mercies; they had got to make room for the Gentiles in the new kingdom! Parables which evidently pointed to that and nothing else, like the Labourers in the Vineyard and the Prodigal Son - all that was a subject on which St Paul felt and wrote furiously; all through the Galatians and the Romans he is talking about nothing else. But he never quotes our Lord as having said anything on the subject; never borrows an illustration, even, from our Lord's teaching. He must have known;

and yet, somehow, the two streams of Christian tradition don't overflow into one another. Merely as a matter of literary curiosity, and quite apart from any bearing it has on religion, I should say that this lack of interdependence between the Gospels and the epistles is a fascinating circumstance, a baffling circumstance.

If we want to understand what St Paul's approach to the matter was, I think we have to concentrate our attention on a passage in the second epistle to the Corinthians (2 Co 5:15-17). 'Christ died for us all,' he writes, 'so that being alive should no longer mean living with our own life, but with his life, who died for us and has risen again. And therefore, henceforward, we do not think of anybody in a merely human fashion; even if we used to think of Christ in a human fashion, we do so no longer. It follows, in fact, that when a man has become a new creature in Christ, his old life has disappeared, everything has become new about him.' The interpretation of that passage is neither easy nor certain, but I think the kind of thing St Paul means is this. It is for the beginner, for the man who is still finding his way into the Church, to study the proofs of our Lord's Divine mission, the miracles, the fulfilments of prophecy; it is for the beginner to learn by heart, if he will, our Lord's recorded sayings. But all that is to know Christ after a human fashion, to treat him as a Man who once lived but now is dead, the subject of a biography. Once you have learned to accept Christ, and to be united with

him by baptism, everything becomes different; he who was once a dead Hero is now a living Friend. Difficult for us, after all these centuries, to think in those terms; we have to treasure up the least crumbs of information we can get about Jesus of Nazareth - it all happened so long ago. But in St Paul's time it was different; the Ascension had only happened the other day; the airs of grace were all about you; why should you go back over the past?

Some instinct of that kind it must have been, I think, which made St Paul and the other New Testament writers strike out a line for themselves, instead of constantly quoting our Lord, constantly appealing to his example, as we should have expected them to do. The Evangelists, you see, were so very much on their good behaviour; they were determined to tell a plain story, not dotting the I's or crossing the T's, leaving it to the reader to form his own conclusions. Every scene must be described just as it appeared to the people who saw it happen; there was to be no improving the occasion, no morals drawn, no theological footnotes. Their readers were to see the Hero of the Gospels as a Man among other men, who lived and died at a given moment in history. All that he was, but for St Paul that was not the point. The point was that our Lord was alive; that he lived on in his mystical Body, the Church. When they met on the road to Damascus, our Lord said, 'Why dost thou persecute me?' and that ME remained in St Paul's thought as the keynote of all his theology.

No, they were not to think of Christ after a human fashion. His nature was Divine; if all things came from the eternal Father, they came from him through Christ; and that 'through' denoted, not a less ultimate responsibility, but somehow a more intimate relation. He was the Elder Brother of all created things, and it was suitable that when God determined to reconcile his rebel world to himself, Christ should be the focus in which all creation should be at once resumed and renewed. His nature was Divine, but the incommunicable privileges of Godhead were not allowed to detain him (*Ph* 2:6); somehow, he took upon himself the nature of Man, accepted all its inadequacies, shouldered all its responsibilities. He, our Elder Brother, our Representative, became our Victim, the Representative of our sin; hung upon the Cross, and, as if by the shock of that unparalleled encounter, shattered all the barriers that had existed till then (*Ep* 2:15) - the barrier between God and Man, the barrier between life and death, the barrier between Jew and Gentile. He died, and in his death mankind, as mystically associated with him, died too, so that the old debt incurred by Adam's sin was cancelled (*Rm* 6:6). He rose again, and thereby acquired a second title to the headship of the human race; he was the Elder Brother of all risen men (*Col* 1:18). The life into which he rose was not a force that quickened his natural body merely; it quickened to birth a new, mystical body of his, the Church. In the power of that life the individual

Christian becomes supernaturally alive; dead to sin, dead to the fetters of the old legal observance, he lives now in Christ, lives to God (*Rm* 6:10). Baptism, his initiation into his Master's death and Resurrection, leaves him, as it were, tongue-tied and gasping for breath, while the Holy Spirit within him cries out, 'Father, Father,' to claim the promise of adoption (*Ga* 4:6). Meanwhile, the Church as a whole is Christ's building, in which we all inhere, is Christ's Bride, inspiring and prescribing sanctity, is Christ's Body, of which we are cells. Our whole life now is Christ-conditioned, he is the medium in which we exist, the air we breathe; all our nature is summed up, all our activities are given supernatural play, in him.

That is St Paul's programme; and perhaps it is not to be wondered at if he passes over in silence the details of a biography, whose total effect so reverberates with theological significance. The Incarnation, for St Paul, did not mean primarily that God had become a *Man*; it meant primarily that God had become Man, had infected the human race, as it were, with his Divinity. 'The Life of Christ' is a phrase which suggests to you and me a book on a shelf, a book by Père Didon or Archbishop Goodier³.

³ Henri Didon (1840-1900), French Dominican, author of *a Life of Christ* translated into English in 1891; Alban Goodier (1869-1939) English Jesuit, Archbishop of Bombay between 1919-1926, wrote *The Public Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (two volumes, 1930) and several similar works.

For St Paul, the phrase had no such meaning; or anyhow, that was not the meaning which leaped to the mind. The Life of Christ was to him an energy that radiated all about him, was the very breath he drew in with his lungs. Do you know what it is to meet some great man, or even some interesting personality that arrests you, and to go away quite forgetting how he was dressed or even what he looked like, because the inspiration of what he was saying riveted you at the time, so that you were unconscious of anything else? And afterwards, even what he said hardly remains in the memory; what exactly *did* he say? All you know is that a kind of glow pervades you, a kind of clarity that reveals your own thoughts to you, as the result of what passed. It is the man's personality that haunts you, something too subtle and too elusive to admit of analysis, something beyond the play of features or the sound of speech; the man himself has cast a kind of spell on you. Something like that happened to St Paul, I suppose, but in an infinitely higher degree, after his experience on the road to Damascus. The shock passed off, the blindness was cured; but always the interior sight of the Apostle was dazzled by the memory of that interview. Stories about Christ, things Christ said, repeat them by all means, but St Paul wanted something more than that; he wanted Christ.

St Ignatius put it on record that, even if no documents of the Christian religion remained, he would have been

prepared to die for the faith, in the light of what our Lord had made known to him at Manresa. And St Paul was in the same category.

There is, I think, something Providential about this attitude of the New Testament writers. Because St Paul contrives to fill in for us, like the blue plate which the printer superimposes on the red, our picture of what our Lord was like, I think there is, about the Synoptic Gospels, a kind of deliberate objectiveness which sometimes makes it hard to understand the way in which their story develops. Why did the Apostles leave their nets and start out without a word, when our Lord said 'Follow me'? What was the magic of voice or look that drew them away, in those early days when no miracles had yet been done, when the campaign of preaching had not yet been opened? Something escapes us in their narrative; what we call, in the loose sense, 'personality'. The tremendous impact which his force of character made on people - do you remember how, according to St John, his captors in the garden went back and fell to the ground when he said, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth'? All that is difficult to realise in the Synoptist account. It becomes easier to realise when you watch the effect it had on St Paul; how, after that interview on the Damascus road, he saw Christ in everyone, Christ in everything; nothing but Christ.

Meanwhile, let us not be betrayed, even for one unguarded moment, into suggesting that St Paul's Gospel

was different from anybody else's Gospel. There was no imputation which he would have met with a more vigorous protest; that we know, because the imputation was in fact made by rival teachers in his own day, anxious to undermine his influence. Always he describes his teaching as a tradition, something which he is handing on; beset with missionary problems, he will yet find time, not once or twice, to go back to Jerusalem and confer with those who were Apostles before him; 'Was it possible,' he asks, 'that the course I had taken was useless?' (*Ga* 2:2). No, we shall hear nothing from St Paul that is not in accord with the full stream of Christian theology. Only Divine truth is rich enough to admit of different angles of human approach. Grace does not destroy nature, it perfects nature; something of the human genius remains, and the pure gold of revelation is not always minted in the same workshop. And St Paul's was no ordinary mind; sensitive, yet fearless, logical, yet poetic, infinitely tender with the scruples of others, yet unflinching in its honesty. A delicate instrument, it will interpret the melody of Christian thought in its own way. We must listen patiently, allowing him his own choice of language, not trying to fix on his words a meaning which has since become technical, not allowing our minds to be disturbed by the echoes of later controversy. You must come to St Paul with fresh eyes if you are to feel his magic.

St Paul and the Old Testament

All that is an allegory. The two women stand for the two dispensations; Hagar stands for the old dispensation, which brings up children to bondage, the dispensation which comes to us from Mount Sinai (Ga 4:24).

Every year, on the fourth Sunday of Lent, the epistle at Mass consists of an elaborate allegory, in which St Paul contrasts Sarah with Hagar, Isaac with Ishmael, something (it is not clear what) with Mount Sinai, and the earthly with the heavenly Jerusalem⁴. Every year, the faithful listen with an air of polite detachment, evidently feeling that they cannot be expected to understand what all this is about. It is this business of the overheard telephone conversation once more; the Galatians, no doubt, had a clue to St Paul's meaning which we haven't.... Yes, but, before you say that, think. Who were the Galatians? Heathens quite recently converted; it was only a year or two, perhaps only a month or two, since they had mistaken St Barnabas for Jupiter, and St Paul for Mercury. Now, Jewish missionaries were trying to persuade them that, in order to be good Christians, they

⁴ The Lectionary for the older form of the Roman rite has, for this Sunday, Galatians 4 vv22-31. The new Lectionary uses this reading on Monday of the 28th week of Ordinary Time, Year 2.

must adopt the law of Moses. What an extraordinary thing that these people, quite stupid country people, Gentile by birth, heathen by education, should be expected to know all about Hagar, all about Mount Sinai, and not only to know about them, but to understand the mystical significance of them, when you and I can't make head or tail of it!

There is only one possible explanation of it; and that is that St Paul, when he instructed enquirers in the faith, told them a great deal about the Old Testament, or at least about the books of Genesis and Exodus. Even if they were Gentiles, to whom the sacred books of the Jews meant nothing, they had got to learn about the Old Dispensation first, before they could see the New Dispensation in its right context, against its right background. Poor stupid slaves from Galatia had got to be taken all through the family history of Abraham and the patriarchs before they got on to the part about Jesus Christ. That is perhaps why, in writing to these same Galatians, St Paul refers to the ordinances of the Jewish law as 'those old schoolroom tasks' (*Ga* 4:9); the Jewish background of the Christian revelation is something that must be laboriously learnt, like the Gender Rhymes, like the Rule of Three⁵; it is a

⁵ These are traditional mnemonic techniques familiar to generations of schoolchildren. The Gender Rhymes list certain Latin nouns whose grammatical gender is apparently anomalous, or counter-intuitive; they were included in Kennedy's *Latin Primer*, the staple text of schoolboy Latin. The Rule of Three is an arithmetical formula for solving proportions: if $a/b = c/d$, and a, b, c are known, but d is not, then $d = cb/a$.

preliminary grind which you have got to get through before your education proper really begins. It might seem dull, but there was no help for it; you must be properly grounded before you could master your subject, and the groundwork of the Christian religion was the story of the Old Testament, which the poor Gentiles had never heard of.

How then does St Paul look back on it, the panorama of history, and the pattern which his own race had woven through it? As a mirror, I think, which reflects the mysteries of the New Dispensation, but reflects them, you might almost say, back to front. Most of us, when we were younger, have tried to cheat the hours of some long railway journey by kneeling up on the seat and watching the scenery flash past, telegraph poles and fields and distant hills, in the looking-glass⁶. Then, when you had got thoroughly accustomed to the rhythm of its movement, you would turn round suddenly and look out of the window at the real scenery, flashing past in the opposite direction. St Paul's view of history is rather like that; he looks back over history and sees the world not merely as bad but as going from bad to worse; that terrible passage in the first chapter of the Romans is meant, evidently, to be a picture of contemporary manners. And the coming of Christ meant, for him, that

⁶ Msgr Knox, and his original readers, lived in a more civilised age where amongst the features of train travel were closed carriages with interior mirrors.

all that process had gone into reverse; with the coming of Christ, history was repeating itself, but repeating itself just the other way round.

He saw our Lord as the second Adam, the Adam who rose, the Adam who restored us, as contrasted with the Adam who fell, the Adam who ruined us. A familiar consideration; but how many times is it mentioned in the Gospels? There is no allusion, from end to end of the Gospels, to the Fall of Man. Adam is only twice mentioned in the New Testament, outside St Paul's epistles, and both times merely in passing. How much St Paul was following the lines of current Jewish interpretation, when he laid such stress on the Fall, we cannot be certain; but the references to it in the Old Testament, outside the second chapter of Genesis, are meagre and inconclusive. The tradition of the Church would beyond doubt have preserved for us, in any case, the doctrine of the Fall, and some account of how it dovetails in with the doctrine of our Redemption. But, so far as Scripture is concerned, you may say it was St Paul alone, under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, who gave the Fall of Adam the place it has in Christian theology.

St Paul saw the Old and New Testaments as a series of parallel columns; he tells us as much in that passage from the Galatians which I gave you as my text. And the list begins quite simply, 'Adam equals Christ'. We must see Adam as the head of the human race by physical descent,

as summing up in his own person the whole experience of humanity; then we shall begin to understand how Christ is the head of the human race by spiritual adoption, and how he sums up in his own person the whole experience of his Church. Because Adam was the head of the human race, the guilt of his transgression transferred itself automatically to his descendants. Oh, no doubt they were sinners too; nobody was more certain than St Paul about the corruption of heathen humanity. But he does not think of them, in this connexion, as imitating and therefore sharing the sin of Adam. He is speaking of transgression; and where there is transgression, there must be a direct commandment to transgress; after the Fall, until the law of Moses came, there was no such direct law issued to mankind, and yet mankind had to bear Adam's punishment. Death reigned; physical death, at once the symbol and the sequel of spiritual inanition. The status of guilt incurred by Adam's transgression lived on in us, his descendants in the natural order (*Rm* 5:12-14).

The obverse of that medal is not difficult to read. Sprung from Adam by physical descent, we acquire the status of guilty men; incorporated into Christ by spiritual adoption, we acquire the status of men reprieved; that is what it means, to be justified. And as it is not, primarily, anything we do that makes guilty men of us, but mere birth from Adam, so it is not anything we do that justifies us, but mere re-birth in Christ. To become the second

Adam, it was only necessary for our Lord to come to earth as Man; he 'took birth from a woman, so as to make us sons by adoption' (*Ga* 4:4). It is in that sense, probably, that we should understand an obscure passage in the first epistle to Timothy, where St Paul, after alluding to the sin of Eve, tells us that 'woman will find her salvation in the child-bearing' (1 *Tm* 2:15); almost certainly, our Lady's Child-bearing is meant. More commonly, it is our Lord's Death and Resurrection that are represented as the gate of the new life which comes to us; mystically associated with our Lord, we die with him and rise again with him. But always St Paul will keep to his chosen symbolism; baptism does not remind him, as it reminds St Peter, of Noah coming out of his ark to repeople the world, does not chiefly remind him, as it reminds the Church on Holy Saturday, of Moses crossing the Red Sea at the head of a redeemed people. No, mankind begins with Adam, who became, as Scripture tells us, a living soul; it is fulfilled in the Adam who has become a life-giving spirit. In a garden the second Adam, like the first, awakes to life.

Meanwhile, there is a gulf of history to be bridged, between man's fall and man's redemption. Something, surely, happened, something of far-reaching importance to mankind, when God gave his law to Moses on Mount Sinai. We are accustomed to think of Mount Sinai as a partial revelation, and perhaps St Paul might have used

the same language; 'the Jews' he writes 'had the words of God entrusted to them' (*Rm* 3:2) although it is doubtful whether 'promises' would not be a better rendering than 'words'. But St Paul thinks in terms of redemption, not of revelation; and where redemption is concerned he will not allow the Mosaic covenant even the dignity of a half-way house. Ever since Adam's fall, the ambition of Man was to be justified; that is, to get rid of the sentence of outlawry imposed on him, and to be once more what Adam had been, *persona grata* with God. Towards the achieving of that ambition, the law of Moses has not brought us one step nearer; not a single step.

No, if anything the law left us worse off than we were before. 'It was brought in,' St Paul tells the Galatians, 'to make room for transgression' (*Ga* 3:19). What does that mean? Why, surely this; that the sins committed between the time of Adam and the time of Moses were not, strictly speaking, transgressions, because (as we have seen) there was no direct law to transgress. With Moses, God's law was expressly promulgated to mankind, and every sin after that was a transgression; nobody could plead that he didn't know he was doing wrong, because here was God's law in black and white to tell him that he was doing wrong. God's purpose, as always, was beneficent; by thus throwing our sins into relief, he made us more eager than ever for the coming of our redemption. But the law didn't help us to get nearer to God, because we all immediately started

disobeying it, just as if it wasn't there. The Psalm describes Almighty God as looking down from heaven to see if he could find a single innocent man; but no, there is nobody who reflects, and searches for God, all alike are on the wrong course (*Rm* 3:11; *Ps* 13:2) - it was a moral which you could illustrate abundantly, at every period, from the writings of the prophets. The Jews, who had received the law, were nevertheless continually disobeying it. That means, evidently, that the law showed us what was the right thing to do, without bringing us the grace which would enable us to do it; revelation without illumination. To prove his point, St Paul gives you in the Romans that terrible chapter which describes the soul, unbefriended by grace, seeing at every turn what is the right thing to do, and doing just the opposite, 'The sense of sin, with the law's ban for its foothold, caught me unawares, and by that means killed me.... It is not the good my will prefers, but the evil my will disapproves, that I find myself doing.... Pitiably creature that I am, who is to set me free from a nature thus doomed to death?' (*Rm* 7:11, 15, 24). The law didn't justify us; it found us sinners, and left us not only sinners but transgressors; that is the long and short of it.

Not that there is anything wrong with the law; it is holy and just and good (*Rm* 7:12). Notice, once again, a difference between the Gospels and the writings of St Paul. The Jews of our Lord's time had elaborated the law into a complicated system of taboos which made it

unnecessarily burdensome; and our Lord denounced the Pharisees, in terms familiar to all of us, for the pedantry and the legalism of it. Nothing easier than for St Paul to have taken up the same point in writing to the Romans or to the Galatians. But he does not attempt to take any such advantage of his opponents; he will yield to none in his respect for the law, only - only the law was a temporary dispensation, meant to last until our redemption came, and no longer. By way of emphasising the fact that it was only something temporary, something secondary, St Paul makes use of a tradition, evidently common among the Jews, although you find no trace of it in the Old Testament, that the law was given to Moses, not directly by God Himself, but by the holy angels, using one of their number as a spokesman (*Ga* 3:19). The law itself was not God's solemn covenant with man; it was only a sort of codicil, added afterwards to regulate the terms of it.

What, then, was God's solemn covenant with man? The promise made, long before, to Abraham. The prophets when they appealed to the Divine fidelity, rested their claim chiefly on the promises made to king David; you will only find Abraham mentioned about seven times in the whole of their writings. But the older tradition survived; both in the Magnificat and in the Benedictus⁷

⁷ These are the two canticles, taken from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, best known from their use in the Morning and Evening Prayer of the Church.

Abraham is the name of destiny. A series of prophecies had been made to him, of which the most far-reaching was, that in his posterity all the nations of the world should find a blessing. We must not lay too much stress on the actual form of the words. To say that all mankind will bless themselves in the name of Abraham's posterity does not mean more, necessarily, than that it will be used in formulas of benediction; 'May the Lord bless thee as he blessed the seed of Abraham'. But it was the tradition of the race that a more solemn assurance was involved; the remote issue of a homeless desert chief was, somehow, to acquire a world-significance. And had it, St Paul asks (*Rm* 4:14)? For a time it might have seemed as if the promise were being fulfilled, when Solomon's empire bridged the land-passage between east and west, receiving in its coffers the tribute of east and west alike. But all that was a thing of the remote past; the balance of the world had shifted, empires had changed hands, and the Jewish race was a despised, a scattered minority of mankind.

And now, with a stroke of the pen, St Paul sweeps away the whole edifice of Jewish privilege. Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned virtue in him; when was that? Before any law had been promulgated on Sinai, before the rite of circumcision had been enjoined, before the birth, even, of Isaac (*Rm* 4:10). It follows that the true descendants of Abraham are not those who claim his physical parentage, but those who share his faith. Carrying

the war into the enemy's country, St Paul goes back to Ishmael, the eldest son of Abraham, but born out of wedlock. And he allegorises the whole story; Ishmael, the natural son, serves for a type of physical descent, of outward observance, of the old covenant generally; Isaac, the child of promise, stands for a type of spiritual sonship, of interior religion, of the new covenant which was given to us in Jesus Christ (*Ga* 4:11 *sqq.*). St Paul has told us elsewhere that what is first in order of importance comes last in order of time (*1 Co* 15:46); man's body is created first, his soul afterwards. So it is here; Isaac, the late-born, who is despised by Ishmael, and is none the less Abraham's heir - we are to see, in him, the image of the Christian Church, later in time than the synagogue, derided by the synagogue, and yet the final repository of God's mercies, the true explanation of his mysterious dealings with mankind, all those centuries ago.

And then, as if the lesson hadn't been made plain enough, the same situation repeats itself in Isaac's family as in Abraham's. Two brothers again, both, this time, born in wedlock; but Esau is the elder, Esau is his father's favourite, Esau is the world's choice, and Esau is rejected. How the Jews had relished that story, contrasting their own future greatness with the rude barbarism of their desert neighbours, the Edomites! But no, says St Paul, the contrast foreshadowed in the book of Genesis was not a contrast between two rival nations, both descended from

Isaac. It was a contrast between two orders, the natural and the spiritual order; between those older things, the law of Moses, the pride of the Jews in their ancestry, and the newer thing that had come to pass, the birth of the Christian Church. Physically descended from Jacob, the Jewish people, like Esau, were being excluded from the promise of Divine mercy - or say, rather, they were excluding themselves from it, by their obstinate rejection of Christ (*Rm 9:9 sqq.*). Useless to ask, why God should allow such blindness to fall on them; you might as well ask why he allowed Pharaoh to harden his heart - indispensable prelude to the triumph of the Exodus. It is a mistake to read that ninth chapter of the Romans as if it were an essay on predestination and free will. St Paul is not thinking about all that; he is thinking about the rejection of the Jews, his fellow countrymen, so melancholy to witness, so difficult to understand (*Rm 9:14 sqq.*).

Always it is like that with St Paul; you cannot make any allusion to the Old Testament without his transposing it into a fresh key, restating it in terms of the New. Even the sins of Israel in the desert were recorded, he says, as a warning to us; to us, in whom history has reached its fulfilment (*1 Co 10:1 sqq.*). Not a mirage, those old promises, but a mirror for Christian souls. I don't mean that St Paul had to invent all this for himself; our Lord, during those forty days after his Resurrection, went back to Moses (we are told) and the whole line of prophets,

interpreting the words used of himself by the scriptures. All I want to suggest is that St Paul fills in for us the outline which the Gospels have left indistinct; what *did* it mean, in the long run, that Providential history of the Jewish people? St Paul can tell us; the Old Testament is a great overture, introducing beforehand all the motifs of the New.

St Paul and Christ's Divinity

He is the true likeness of the God we cannot see; his is that first birth which precedes every act of creation (Col 1:15).

When a man gets hold of a new idea, or rather, is got hold of by a new idea, which throws him off his balance and reinterprets the world for him, it may have any one of three effects on his daily conversation, and on his published writings. He may keep silent about it, except when he is in specially congenial company; he may have the feeling that this idea is so much too big for him, he will only spoil it if he tries to put it into his own words; people will take it up wrong, and be offended by it, or people will misunderstand it, and exaggerate it, and vulgarise it; far best, when the general public is listening, to hush it up. Or the effect may be just the opposite; he may be so full of his subject that he cannot resist bringing it up on any and every occasion; always he is wanting to buttonhole people and tell them about it, argue about it. Or, finally, it may become, from the first, part of the background of his mind, something which he takes for granted, and takes it for granted that everybody else takes it for granted too. He does not drag it in, does not harp on it, it seems to crop up naturally; it makes itself known in

casual allusions, in the unconscious overtones of his thought. Now, which of those three effects did his conversion have on St Paul?

Rather unexpectedly, neither the first nor the second, but the third. The more you read his epistles, the more (I think) you get the impression that the mysteries of Christian theology are neither a difficult topic which he is anxious to avoid, nor the professed subject of his teaching, but his whole mental background, which keeps on showing whether he means it to or not.

It would have been so easy to understand, if St Paul, writing when he did, writing for the sort of people who were going to hear his letters read out, had felt inclined to soft-pedal the note of dogma. After all, who were these people? Mostly, you would imagine, rather stupid people, many of them slaves, nearly all of them pagans till yesterday. As pagans, they had worshipped a whole pantheon; it had been hard enough to make them believe there was only one God - wouldn't the doctrine of the Trinity be rather confusing to them? As pagans, they had offered incense to the memory of dead emperors, deified now, the neuropath Tiberius, the madman Caligula - would they be able to see the point of the Incarnation? Wouldn't it be safer to tell them stories about the life of Jesus? But no, St Paul would spare them nothing. Contrariwise, if you *were* going to mention dogma, you would be inclined to rub it in, with a lot of simplification

and a lot of repetition: 'Remember, three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost' - staccato echoes of the classroom. But no, that is not St Paul's method either. He treats his converts as if they had been instructed as well as you or I - better than some of us; he will refer to the august mysteries of the Faith in an almost casual way; as if everybody, naturally, would understand all about *that*; he alludes to these things not because the guttersnipes of Philippi will need to be told about them, but because they happen, for the moment, to throw light on his argument; a mere reference, a mere allusion, and he passes on to something else. How strange it seems to us! And perhaps rather humiliating.

The doctrine of the Trinity - how little your attention is drawn to it as you read through the first three Gospels! Only at the last moment, when our Lord is making ready to ascend into heaven, does he explain to his Apostles that they are to baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. With St Paul it is quite otherwise; he doesn't insist on the doctrine, but it keeps on cropping up. It's not merely that he closes an epistle with a formula of blessing which includes the threefold invocation (2 Co 13:13). What is much more significant is the way his thought travels back, unbidden, to the subject we half expected him to avoid. He is telling the Corinthians that they ought not to quarrel about the importance of this or that spiritual endowment; after all,

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