

Pentecost

Of all the mysteries of Christianity, this one seems to me to be most profoundly at odds with the modern world's preoccupation with self, about which I am alternately consoled and impatient. I will try to explain this vacillation.

To my mind, there seems to be a whole agenda of Christian life about dealing with selfhood. We all have a powerful drive to self-interest, self-centredness, and self-serving, and we are usually prepared to call these things bad: we would be certain about the evils of self-importance, self-obsession or self-justification.

On the other hand, we, and our University, and perhaps our employer, are prepared to call things like ambition a virtue, along with self-respect, self-help, and self-possession. We cannot live human lives without selfhood, but we cannot survive the ultimate expression of selfishness. It is a very delicate matter, and we should be warned that, on the hoof, there might barely be a gnat's croquet of difference between good and evil in these distinctions.

Our age sets great store by selfhood. As the realities that govern us get bigger and more indomitable, we yearn more and more for the sensation of freedom. We want to shout our name against the anonymity of the world. We have been for some time keen on the lonely individual, who steers his boat by a lone star, and keeps his soul free of the clouds of affection and partiality. Undismayed by the complications of suffering humanity, he sees with clarity, and follows through to the end the course of his duty, assailed constantly by the opposition of small minds and mean interests, the criminal, the enslaved, and the terminally stupid. In a bent, hard, cruel world, *He* (it usually is a he) *Did It His Way*. He may be burdened with the endearing weaknesses which show his humanity peeping out; but he knows how to carry his bat to the end of the innings. Starring John Wayne, Sean Connery, Steve McQueen, Clint Eastwood, Telly Savalas, Shirley Bassey, Frank Sinatra....but where are the real-life ones?

Our real lives are far more about conformity. Fashion, public opinion, music, style and taste is terribly standardised. Looking out of my window at the University is a study in black, navy and denim, with an occasional mad flash of khaki or dull mauve to liven up the mix. Still, lurking beneath this uniform appearance, is that generation which believes there are no universal principles except that there are no universal principles. The chaos which must inhabit the space behind these impassive countenances! How do *they* draw the boundaries, if they ever do, between selfhood and selfishness?

There is a line in the Fourth Gospel which strikes me every time I read it. Jesus talks about our being part of the Vine (and He is the Vine). He thus subordinates our being to his. He also refers to the fact that this opens us to being *pruned* by means of his word - which I think means that we are judged, and trimmed, and trained according to a criterion we have not established: no tree dictates the terms of its own pruning. Then Jesus says, to remind us, these words:

You did not choose me. No, I chose you; and I commissioned you to go out and bear fruit - fruit that will last; and then the Father will give you anything you ask him in my name.

This seems to fly in the face of the values of our age. Here we are defined by another; we are creatures, obedient in our very being to a hand we did not direct. Even partnership, that

free co-operation of equals, seems impossible as a response: there is little of *partnership* between a branch and its vine. The choice is not ours, but his; the commissioning is his definition of the way we are to go and what we are to aim at. I suppose there is something left of self-expression; but even that is under strict conditions:

Cut off from me you can do nothing; anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that is thrown away: it withers. Such branches are piled on the fire and burnt.

I am thinking along these lines today because of the great Solemnity of Pentecost tomorrow. It has been interpreted in so many ways; we easily meditate on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a kind of divine consecration of individuality, because the descending fire parts, and settles on the head of each of them. We often hear the word *charism*, and its adjective *charismatic*, applied in the same kind of climate; people are charismatic when they are real characters, powerful and unique, creative and stimulating; this is what the charisms, or gifts of the Holy Spirit, do to a human being.

Firstly, I would want to say that nothing touched by the Holy Spirit can be less than human, only more than human. So this life-and-death dependence of the branch on the vine can't be a sub-human reality. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given as a personal grant, tailored to each individual; an individual gifted by the Holy Spirit has a value and dignity that is no longer to be judged by others. The abuse of such a person by others allies them to Jesus, also condemned, and recoils in judgment on his or her contemners: remember those mysterious words of Jesus: *whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven*. Once we have understood that we are to be raised above common humanity, our grafting to the Vine becomes an infinite access of meaning and direction to our lives. We must salute this dignity in others, and find our home in it for ourselves. Our "remaining" in this relationship, above all others and (if necessary) at the cost of all others, is the new way of understanding *integrity*.

Secondly, I would want to point out the difference between the life of a creature, and that of a redeemed creature. The uncritical modern stance, "Take me or leave me, this is how I am" is surely a wrong conclusion to draw from the fact of creation. God has made us what we are, but that does not mean that God consecrates every impulse, every possibility, every tendency we experience in ourselves. He has established us in freedom, with a variety of choices for us to follow: the question of *integrity* arises again, as we ask ourselves what is the right thing to do? Again, the voice of the age says: *Be yourself - do what you would most like to do*. A redeemed creature may pause before this advice, and remember the obedience that belongs to a creature. In some way, we do not belong to ourselves, but have a relationship which makes authoritative demands on us. We can live out our dignity, and abide in the relationship we have with God, or we can set ourselves firmly in the centre of our perspective, and follow our taste. You can see that quite a gulf is opening between Christian and worldly values.

Thirdly, I would say that Pentecost means that the Creator and Redeemer towards whom I have been turning is no longer above our heads or beyond our horizon. In Pentecost God becomes truly *our* God, and comes to dwell within us. Here at last the division between the Christian and the world is annulled; our obedience to God, the life-giver, is no longer an exterior matter. This paradox is very powerful: it means that the Spirit is flowing in our veins, that the beat of the heart belongs to God, that we can no longer tolerate a definition of us that leaves God out of account. In this sense, we cannot deny obedience to God without denying ourselves. That is the final establishment of a holy integrity, which reflects the truth of the incarnation itself: God became what we are in Jesus. Now we are to become divine in

response to his redemption of us. That means that we are already living in the world as God intends we shall; and in us the world is newly-understood, newly-interpreted. In our religion, we no longer look outwards *away from the world*; in our living, we are making the world afresh, because the Spirit that hovered over the waters at Creation, the Spirit who came upon the virginity of Mary at the Incarnation, is present in us.

The divine Spirit cannot be present as a visitor, or as an ornament. He is destined to reign in us, or never to come at all. People who use the vocabulary of faith, but fail to experience it, may say all the right things, and still know nothing of their meaning. Some have such self-assurance that they assume it is only right that the Spirit should indwell their lives. (Where better could he go?) Others are so defeated and despairing, that they can only be satisfied by the constant awareness of their poverty and weakness. It is doubtful whether either of these know the Holy Spirit. Both need the dethronement of self, the pushing-aside of personal perception, so that the inrushing power of the Spirit may possess them. For Pentecost, the whole being has to turn to the incoming God, and say: *Bless the Lord, my soul, who calls me into life!* This marvellous encounter with the God who is *other than I*, is yet so deeply personal and individual, that we can truly say we are obedient to our deepest self, to the deepest experience we have had, when we are obedient to God. The life of a saint is in this way most deeply human, and simultaneously totally open to the Spirit of God. At Pentecost, therefore, there is no annihilation of the gifts God gave at Creation; only a redirection that liberates, harnesses, and directs them all in one peaceful, graceful sense of movement, with nothing redundant, nothing discordant, nothing lost or worthless.

We, who come to celebrate Pentecost tonight, must ask nothing less of the God who made us. We cannot hope for the worldly, temporary sense that we have done everything our own way, and in that sense triumphed over the world. Jesus was crucified by the world, and gloried in his dismissal from its honours-list. What we pray for is a recreated self, which openly belongs to the scheme of the Eternal, and already lives by the unearthly reign of the Risen Son, who is Lord and Shepherd of all the ages.