

OUR LADY IN SCRIPTURE: I

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IF you live by mountains or the sea your life is moulded by them. It may be that they are out of sight and that it is only in the lie of the land, in a wind that blows over you cold from the snows or warm and salty from the sea that you are made consciously aware of them; perhaps you remember from time to time to make an expedition to refresh your memory of the way they look. But in some way or another they are a presence in your life. Although we are not always aware of her, our Lady is always present to the Church, is present in the life of each one of us; when we are aware of her it is not by the senses of the body but by the spiritual sense of faith. She is there, a reality like the unseen mountains, a human person, closer to God than any other, whose earthly life is past but whose glory in heaven is both present and future, present in our faith and future in the culmination and final unveiling of God's glory in himself and in the fulfilment of his creation. We have to hold in balance our sense of the humanness of our Lady, hearing as it were the tread of her feet on the earth, and on the other hand our knowledge of the meaning of that human life for us, whether this is developed theologically or not. It is possible to err one way or the other, not only in the statement of faith—for example, admitting and loving her human qualities but denying the fullness of the meaning of her life, as the reformers did, and so rejecting later definitions of her sinlessness and glory—but also in the way we represent her to ourselves or allow her to be represented. If we put up reminders of her sorrows in the form of a large heart stuck with swords, we run the risk of forgetting that her heart was a heart of real flesh, functioning like any other. The usual statues of the Immaculate Conception do not represent a woman who could have and did suckle a child, do not perhaps even represent her sinlessness, since an abstraction cannot sin. The point is to present the mystery, the *significance* of this *human* being, of *this* person, in some form in which we can contemplate her, to make it present by some means which allows us to come in faith to the person it presents.

If we are to contemplate our Lady in the heavenly mystery

which lies before us and which is in some way anticipated here in faith, the first thing to remember is that she is only an element in it—the mystery itself, the loving mercy of God shown in the history which saved and is saving us, is so very great that this is not to belittle her. The element which she is, virgin and mother, is essential once granted that God took his flesh from her flesh, but it means that she is dependent and subordinate, wholly dependent on God, wholly subordinate to her son. The glory of God is boundless; if her glory is bounded, this does not mean that we can see into its fullest extent and depth. The second thing to remember is that all that she is now—in the timeless ‘now’ of heaven and the ‘here and now’ of the Church—is the fulfilment of all she was on earth, all she did and all she lived through. Her heavenly glory and her continuing action within the Church (and outside it) are not just a kind of prize, as if she had got a book-token for coming top of her class, but to be herself and to act as herself in the glory of God, herself as he made her through her life on earth. Her human life and her glory are not two totally distinct lives; the second is the revelation of the first in its fullness in another dimension. It is no use to regret that we have few details of her earthly life, details, that is, of the kind that we expect in modern biographies, the unexpected individual characteristics which give us the sense of the uniqueness of this or that saint or statesman. We are given, if we look for them and explore them, the essential events and personal proceedings which are both her own in her own life and at the same time what she was meant to be in time and in eternity for God and for us. An example, though more about this will emerge later, would be the element of suffering involved in her actual relationship with her son; one strand of this is the tension that is present in the relationship of any mother to any son, the point at which the mother has to let go, to let her son assume his own responsibility, to make his own life. But this was not an event merely in the life of our Lady, it was a moment in the history of salvation, a consent to the events which led to the Passion and to her own com-*passion*. It is primarily from this latter aspect, her part in the history of salvation, that the sacred writers treat of her.

God the Holy Spirit—it is part of our faith—is the principal author of the two testaments; the human writer becomes his instrument, but retains his full human freedom and individual

characteristics. In general, the human writers move on two levels, recording the events which make up the history of salvation, from the calling of Abraham on, and, by the selection they make or the way in which they write, interpreting those events in the light of God's revelation. In a single writer the two levels are fused, but we have only to read two versions of Israel's earlier history, in the books of Kings and the books of Chronicles, to see that one interpretation alone does not exhaust the richness of this revelation even in, so to speak, its earlier stages. For the apostles in their preaching and for the writers of the New Testament a further dimension is added in that the depth of meaning of the events they are proclaiming is made explicit by their relationship to the past. For instance, first they are proclaiming or recalling the crucifixion, an event of which they or at least certain disciples were eyewitnesses, something that happened at a definite time and place. Secondly, they were given by the risen Saviour himself his own power to understand the Old Testament and to interpret it towards the events of his life, death and resurrection; in this instance, from the beginning of their preaching they were able to interpret the crucifixion in the light of Isaiah's prophecies of the suffering of the Righteous Servant of God and in terms of the ritual of Passover, somewhat later perhaps the terms derived from the temple sacrifice and the temple priesthood. These were indeed part of the significance of the crucifixion in the mind of our Lord himself in the hours in which it took place, they were made explicit by being related to the new understanding of the earlier writings. Thirdly, this interpretation-revelation was or could be further interpreted by the apostles and New Testament writers themselves (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit), as in St Paul's words in Philippians 2, 5-11, themselves perhaps a quotation from an early Christian hymn: '... Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. . . . ' The events of sacred history open out in an ever deepening revelation of God's glory and his love for us, towards the final showing of their full significance when Christ brings that history to an end. Our Lady is an integral part of this. She lived, she was known, she

had a personal history which was at once her own and an essential part of God's saving work in her son, and the significance of this was realized in her relationship to him and in him to the past of Israel.

There are four areas of the New Testament in which our Lady appears; they each contain fragments of her personal history, but they have not been remembered or recorded by the evangelists for their own sake as such, they occur as part of the revelation of her son. We have to read them first in this context, after that we can perhaps see back through the significance to the events in themselves. These four areas are: (a) the oral tradition of our Lord's public ministry used in the first three gospels; (b) the infancy narrative in St Matthew's gospel; (c) the infancy narrative in St Luke's gospel; (d) two episodes in St John's gospel. The first category can be reduced to two items: (i) the setting of a saying of our Lord regarding family ties and obedience to the will of God (Matt. 12, 46-50; Mark 3, 31-35; Luke 8, 19-21); (ii) the reference to our Lady in the story of the rejection at Nazareth, told in a slightly different form by each of the first three evangelists (Matt. 13, 53-58; Mark 6, 1-6; Luke 4, 16-30 and cp. John 6, 42). In each of these areas, the tradition or the writer has his own overall point of view: the oral tradition is concerned with the public ministry of our Lord and its effect on his hearers; our Lady appears incidentally. Matthew is written from the standpoint of Joseph and the house of David, the author is interested in our Lord as the descendant of David and as the Jewish Messiah. St Luke is probably translating and slightly re-writing a document issuing from a person or a circle familiar with our Lady herself. St John is recalling from his memories two episodes which have a special significance. Similarly, each of the last three, in whom the interest in our Lady's role is deepening, has his own way of conveying the significance of it. Matthew has selected incidents which serve his purpose and clinches each incident with an appropriate quotation from the Old Testament. Luke, or the author of the document which he is translating, selects incidents, notes times and places and chooses language which carry less obvious references to the Old Testament. John's episodes are part of the structure of the gospel as a whole and their significance is conveyed partly by reference to this structure and again partly by reference to Old Testament themes which his hearers or readers

would be expected to pick up, given the development of Christian preaching and knowledge of the scriptures at the time he wrote. Evidently we must read each first in its own context and, as far as we are able, with the understanding presupposed by the author in his own contemporaries. As we do so, we shall see different aspects of the mystery of our Lady, but as yet unsystematized. This may appear at first disadvantageous, but it is not always desirable to try to present a mystery tidily; it is impossible to represent a human person in terms of the chemical components of their body, the living being disappears. But it will be possible, then, to relate these aspects to one another—the family and milieu of our Lady, daughter of Israel and mother of the Messiah; her sufferings and compassion; the second Eve, mother of all the living who live by grace—in such a way that we can see something of the richness and depth of the mystery in its wholeness.

But there is another advantage in starting in this way and it is that we bridge the gap between the dogmatic definitions of the Church on the one hand and the way we honour our Lady in the liturgy on the other. Definitions represent the way in which the Church has crystallized for our safety certain aspects of the mystery which she contemplates in her faith and in the Scriptures. In the liturgy she is exploring and expanding one of the methods of the New Testament itself. We can, as it were, come forward in time along the development of dogma with the Church and relate the definitions which we know in the present to the person and significance of our Lady as we have learnt to know them in the Scriptures *and* go backward in time and relate our Lady to the history, persons, themes and symbols of the earlier sacred writings; though these may not have been so related to our Lady by the New Testament writers themselves, they have affinities with those which they did use. The liturgy applies to our Lady descriptions of the figure of Wisdom which the New Testament writers did not; for example—

In the holy tabernacle I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion.

In the beloved city likewise he gave me a resting place,
and in Jerusalem was my dominion.

So I took root in an honoured people,
in the portion of the Lord who is their inheritance.

from Ecclesiasticus 24, 10-12 where Wisdom is personified as a

radiant woman. But if we find St Luke writing of our Lady in such a way as to refer to texts of the Old Testament where Jerusalem is personified as the Daughter of Sion—

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion . . .

Ló, your king comes to you. (Zach 9, 9)

we are halfway at least to the liturgical application of the former text. There is at any rate an affinity between the method of Luke and the way in which the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, makes use of the scriptures in the liturgy.

THE SUNDAY SERMON: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

ROSEMARY SHEED

FROM the sonorous periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the friendly intimacy of Billy Graham, preaching has always held a central position in protestantism. The sermon, for many, is the major attraction of the service, and often the quality of a man's preaching seems the chief determining factor in the size of his congregations. The clergymen of detective stories are so often in their studies on Saturday afternoon preparing the next day's sermon that we should suspect the worst if we found them doing anything else. But though we are quite accustomed to priests' excusing themselves from our dinner parties to finish their Office, I think most people would be astonished if a priest said he must leave to work on a sermon. Somehow, apart from special occasion sermons (such as weddings and funerals), most of us don't seem to take preaching very seriously. Many Catholics will make quite an effort to get to a mass without a sermon on Sundays—nor are they necessarily those who only go because the Church says they must: many of them are the daily mass-goers.

The chief reason for this state of affairs, I imagine, is that we all know the mass to be what matters—English Catholics perhaps more than most, since it was the centre of attack in penal days.