

marks for the religious a turn in the year, the beginning of the fast that continues till Easter. It is a fitting reminder that asceticism and penance, death to sin, are not the gloomy core of Christian life but the triumphant introduction of new vitality and peace. With the reintroduction of a liturgical or sacramental attitude to Christianity this feast can therefore stand for a central aspect regained in the Christian's apprehension of the Cross. Not that the experience of the agony of Calvary should now be set on one side. That is the same temptation—to stress only one aspect, to leave our heritage behind in our enthusiasm for some novelty. The whole tree can now be seen once more in all its beauty. Indeed it seems that in this mid-twentieth century we stand a chance of entering into our full inheritance in a way unparalleled in history—if only we keep our heads and prevent ourselves from grasping at novelties. We have come to realize something of the full sacramental life of the earlier ages of the Church but at the same time we inherit the individual piety of the post-reformation period which contains so much of value to the Christian's experience of our Lord in his death as in his life. We must reaffirm the full significance of the exaltation of the Cross without denying the validity of the type of crucifix that our grandparents have left us.



## THE VISION OF THE HOLY ROOD

AIDAN BAKER, C.P.

WHEN Augustine, Columba and Aidan converted the English in the sixth and seventh centuries, their devoted labours profoundly affected the national literature. Despite the hazy general belief that English History and Literature set off together in 1066 on their long march, England from before the time of Alfred had had a great tradition of prose and verse. Indeed, in the ninth century, she had a considerable body of prose literature when other languages had hardly even begun verse.

English poetry from the seventh century onwards gives abundant proof of the ardour with which the Teutonic conquerors of Britain embraced the religion of Christ; and in less than a century these once pagan invaders had made their adopted land into a splendid home of Christianity. The Church's influence on the English way of life was deep and wide. Churches were built, monasteries established, and schools founded; no mean accomplishment in such war-like days. Nor was there a lack of teachers and writers. Aldhelm of Malmesbury, Bede of Jarrow and Alcuin of York are only a few of the great figures of this period whose fame reached out beyond Britain to the Continent. In the monasteries, the skilful illumination of manuscripts and the art of music flourished. Domestic economy and agriculture improved, skilled workers in stone, glass, and embroidery were imported, and the vernacular literature and arts received a new impetus; to such an extent that one authority goes so far as to say that in the eighth century, England—thanks to the Church—held the intellectual leadership of Europe.

The old alliterative English verse had had a gaunt grandeur of its own, and when wedded to the new Christian beliefs, eked out the more clerklly Latin in spreading the Faith far and wide among the laity. The union of the new Faith with the familiar verse form, hallowed by tradition, went far to popularizing the Christianity with which the people had so recently been enriched.

One of these eighth-century poems ranks as perhaps the most beautiful and imaginative of all early English poems. 'The Dream of the Holy Rood', as it is called, is the only 'dream-poem' extant composed in England before the Norman Conquest. We are familiar with the personification of the Holy Cross in several Latin hymns, notably the *Vexilla Regis* and the *Crux Fidelis*; and in this early English poem, devotion to our Lord's Passion is carried a step further. The Cross itself speaks.

The poet is growing old, he has few friends left, and is in a state of deep depression: all traditional features of the earlier literature. A wonderful vision of the Cross is vouchsafed him, which he fashions into a moving poem, giving utterance to his emotion, at once simple and devout. Technically the poem is carefully composed, and its details remarkably living and vigorous. The poet begins by describing the Cross, which appeared to him one night as he lay asleep, tells of how it spoke to him of the

Passion of the Saviour, and concludes with a fervent prayer that springs from his new-found peace and confidence.

'Lo, now shall I speak of the choicest of dreams, which I dreamt in the middle of the night.' Thus the poem opens. Men were lying asleep on their resting-places, and the poet beholds a wondrous Tree rising aloft, encompassed with light. It is besprinkled with gold, fair jewels are set at the surface of the earth: and there are also five gems upon the 'shoulder-span'. 'Truly that was not the gallows of the evil-doer', but the angels of God and all mankind are gazing upon it. 'Wondrous was the cross of victory', says the poet—'but I—stained with sin, stricken with foulness'. He sees the Cross gleaming with gold, jewels covering 'the Rood of the All-Wielder'. Yet through the gold he can perceive that the Tree had once bled on the right side. Struck with sadness, he watches the Tree change in appearance; now adorned with treasure, now bedewed with the flowing of blood. And as he watches, 'that most excellent Tree began to speak with words'.

It tells how, 'long ago—I am yet mindful of it', it had been hewn down on the borders of the forest, fashioned into a gibbet, and bidden to raise up felons on high. It had been carried to a hill, and there firmly fastened. 'Then beheld I the Lord of men hastening with great valour, desirous to mount up on me.' The Tree laments—'Then I durst not, because of the Lord's behest, bow or break when I saw trembling the surface of the earth: I could have felled all his foes—yet stood I firm.' And it watches while 'the young hero, he who was God Almighty, stripped himself, firm and unflinching'; he mounted the towering Cross, 'high-hearted in the sight of many, minded to redeem mankind. Then did I tremble, when the Man embraced me; yet durst I not bow down to the earth . . . I was bound to stand fast.' And the Cross announces proudly: 'As a Rood was I reared on high; bore I aloft the mighty King, the Lord of Heaven; I durst not stoop myself'.

But the Passion was not over. 'They drove through me with dark nails; the wounds, gaping gashes of hatred, are still plain to behold on me. The foes bemoaned us both together—nor durst I injure any of them. I was all bedewed with blood, pouring from the Man's side, after he had sent forth his spirit.'

Then the Cross tells of its bitter experiences on the hill-top: it beheld the God of Hosts cruelly stretched out, 'darkness had

covered with clouds the corpse of the All-Wielder. All Creation wept, lamenting the slaughter of the King—and 'Christ was on the Rood'.

Now come the 'eager ones' to relieve the Cross of its burden—'I beheld all that'. The Cross bowed down to them 'in humbleness and with great zeal' as they raised him from his heavy torment, and left the Cross to stand lonely on the bleak hill-side, 'covered with blood, all stricken with shafts'. It watches the preparations for the burial—'Then laid they him down, weary of limb, stood at his body's head; looked on the Lord of Heaven, exhausted after that mighty strife'. They fashion him a tomb, hewn out of the bright stone, and place him therein. Then they chant a dirge of sorrow, and 'fare forth, wearied, from their glorious prince' who rests there in silence.

Their voices die away, 'wretched, in the eventime', and the three crosses are vividly pictured standing, streaming with blood, deserted on the lonely summit, while 'cold grew the corpse, the fair home of the soul'. Then came men to fell the crosses, and bury them in a deep pit. But they were not forgotten—'there the followers of the Lord found me out, raised me from the ground, adorned me with gold and silver'.

The Cross now addresses the poet more personally, and teaches him that though formerly it had, in union with Christ, and precisely because of Christ, suffered 'grievous sorrows, the work of evil-doers', nevertheless now, far and wide, all over the earth 'men do me honour, worship at this Sign'. The lesson here cannot be more pointed. 'On me for a space suffered the Son of God; for which cause I now tower aloft, glorious under Heaven. And I can heal all those that fear me; once was I become the cruellest of torments . . . until I opened to men the true path of life.' And now follows a striking reference to our Blessed Lady: 'Lo, then did the prince of glory honour me above all the trees of the forest—even as he, Almighty God, did honour his Mother, Mary herself, above the whole race of women, for the sake of all men.'

The Cross ceases to speak, but the poet's depression has gone. He breaks forth into a fervent prayer. It is true—he has not now many friends, they have all gone away from the joys of this world; but he realizes that they are living in Heaven, dwell in glory with the High-Father. For himself '. . . every day I look

for the time when the Lord's Cross, which here on earth erstwhile I saw, will fetch me from this fleeting life, and bring me where there is great gladness, joy in Heaven. . . . A friend to me may the Lord be, who here on earth suffered aforetime on the Cross for the sins of men. . . . He has redeemed us, has given us life, a heavenly abode'.

Though more than twelve centuries have passed, we can still appreciate the simple devotion of this early English poet, whose verses should have an especial appeal for us priests, working in his native land. The lesson of the Cross for us can hardly be more clearly stated: '. . . then did I tremble, when the Man embraced me; yet durst I not bow down to the earth . . . I was bound to stand fast'. But there is comfort too in the words of the Cross: '. . . I can heal all those that fear me; once was I become the cruellest of torments . . . until I opened to men the true path of life'. We may indeed make our own the prayer of the poet: 'A friend to me may the Lord be. . . . He has redeemed us, has given us life, a Heavenly abode.'



## THE SIGN OF THE CROSS

DEBORAH PEASE ARMSTRONG

ONE of the actions which signifies the presence of a Catholic Christian is making the sign of the cross. The result would startle us if we counted up the number of times we make it during one day or during one celebration of Holy Mass. This sign becomes an automatic part of our lives, to sign the sign of the cross can be almost a reflex action; and surely non-Catholics may be forgiven if they suppose it to be just another bit of external ritual, enforced habit or even superstition. Perhaps at any one moment it may in the concrete be only one of these things, but this sign has an almost infinite richness in itself of which it may be worth while to attempt a brief exploration.

Writing on *The Meaning of Existence* (p. 119) Dom Illtyd