

WHOM DO MEN SAY THAT I AM?

IAN HISLOP, O.P.

ST John tells us in his gospel that St John the Baptist, when he saw our Lord coming to him, cried out: 'Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who taketh away the sin of the world' (John I, 29). The voice of the Baptist has from that moment challenged the world, for though John the Baptist died his martyr's death, the living voice of the Church still proclaims his message. To the world, to all mankind, she says: 'Behold the Lamb of God'; and in saying this she forces the human race to make some answer to the question: 'Whom do men say that I am?' (Mark 8, 27.)

Habit, or ignorance springing from indifference, seems to have made the question almost meaningless; or—and here, I think, we get a little nearer to the bone—it is half listened to, its implications half grasped, and then half uneasily, by a secret act of will, which is almost masked, even from ourselves; we avert our attention onto some less disturbing subject. It is easy enough to ponder gently on religious topics, even to be pious in a superficial sort of way, to listen to many of the 'words' the Church tells us and to avoid the great and inescapable truth which the Church reiterates, in season and out of season, 'that God hath made both Lord and Christ, this . . . Jesus'. (Acts 2, 36.)

Having said this, it is as well to pause for a moment. How do we understand this statement of the Church? Do we see it only as something which is said, as indeed it is, to an unheeding and pagan world? How often do we not send all the spiritual teaching we hear to somebody else's address? Very little progress can be made in the spiritual life or in apostolic activity (which after all is effective only in so far as it is rooted in and fed by that life), if we are not fully aware of the critical nature of the question which is put, not just to mankind, but to us. So great is the claim which the questioner makes that we cannot simply shrug off the question as one which can be answered tomorrow. 'Whom do you say that I am?' And if we answer with St Peter, then our whole life must be seen as revolving round that point at which God, as it were, took man to himself.

In order that we may see this, realise it in such a way that its implications soak in to tinge all our activities, to inspire all our volition, it is necessary for us to meditate who it is that puts the question to us. The simplest, and I think the best, way to begin this meditation is to ponder on the teaching of the Old Testament. There we meet a people under the condemnation of God for sin and faithlessness, but a people who have faith, for they know, or at least, the prophets know, that though the anger of God goes before his face, he is none the less a God of mercy. Man by Adam's sin has fallen away from God, but God remains the Lord, the unique Creator who holds all things in the hollow of his hand. The universe is his, man is his. Man's sin, man's disobedience does not thwart God's providence, and in spite of himself the sinner in his sin exists before the God from the scope of whose wisdom and love none can escape. To man in rebellion, through the patriarchs and prophets, came a word from God; to creation groaning, waiting for it knew not what, came the promises of God.

As the ages pass the message becomes more and more explicit. To the serpent it is said 'she shall crush thy head' (Gen. 3, 15); to Abraham it is promised that 'in thee shall all the kindred of the earth be blessed' (Gen. 12, 3). Gradually the promise unfolds until in the great prophets the picture of the King who is to come can be glimpsed: 'the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel—God with us' (Isaias 7, 14); 'a child is born to us and a son is given to us and the government is upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace' (Isaias 9, 6); 'the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him . . . he shall judge the poor with justice . . . and he shall set up a standard unto the nations. . .' (Isaias 11, 2, seq.) More even than that, the child, the King, will restore the peace and the harmony lost through sin. Through sin the garden of Paradise was closed to man, who was cast out into the desert, but the hoped-for Messiah will restore all things. 'The land that was desolate and impassable shall be glad: and the wilderness shall rejoice and flourish like the lily . . . then shall the eyes of the blind be opened: and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped . . . and a path and a way shall be there, and it shall be called the holy way.' (Isaias 35, 1, seq.)

'The desired of all nations shall come' (Aggeus 2, 8); 'rejoice

greatly . . . shout for joy . . . Behold thy King will come to thee, the just and saviour' (Zach. 9, 9.) Yet 'though the bow for war shall be broken . . . and his power shall be from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the end of the earth' (Zach. 9, 10), there is another aspect to the picture. 'There is no beauty in him, nor comeliness, and we have seen him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of him. Despised and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity: and his look was as it were hidden and despised. Whereupon we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows; and we have thought him as it were a leper and as one struck by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our iniquities: he was bruised for our sins. . . . He was offered because it was his own will, and he opened not his mouth. He shall be led as a lamb to the slaughter.' (Isaias 53, 1, seq.)

These things were spoken and heavy with meaning they come to us. The Christ, the Church teaches, is this King, who brings with him the re-creative power of God; he is the holy child, the suffering servant. This is a prediction, a story, something told by men, but the Church is not about a story only, not founded simply on the inspired longing of the Jewish heart. The Church is about an event, an event which has a unique character. Before the event God was mediated to men through symbols. This age is over and done with, for no longer is God hidden in the cloud, in the tent, or his Word represented by letters on tables of stone, but he has come: the Word has been made flesh and dwells among us, he is present, flesh and blood, God dwelling in the midst of his people.

In the event, which is the incarnation of the Second Person, the human, by the power of God, is taken into union with the divine. In Christ man meets God, no longer a question of symbolism, for in the place of the symbol there is substituted the reality. He is in the midst of his people—he who is Creator, Lord and Saviour.

The virgin 'brought forth her first-born son' (Luke 2, 7), and 'all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spake by the prophet' (Matt. 1, 22). This son is he 'who shall save the people from their sins' (Matt. 1, 20).

Before his face went his prophet, 'the prophet of the highest', who went 'before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways' (Luke 1, 76). The Baptist cried to the people saying 'Behold the Lamb of God'; 'And Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee' (Mark 1, 9).

The Baptist recognised him, the apostles recognised him. Did not St Peter declare that his life, death and victory had brought the great day of the Lord, when all things were remade, foretold by the prophet, Joel? (Acts 2, 16); were they not conscious that the unique figure had sent them with power to all mankind? The cry of the Baptist, the faith and life of the Church take their rise from the conviction that Christ is Lord. Scripture and tradition proclaim Christ as Lord. He is presented to us not simply as the wise and gentle carpenter of Nazareth, as the prophet of humility and love, as a man who sums up in his person the whole tragedy of mankind. He also appears as the King and the Judge, the Son of Man, the Holy One, and as the Son. His birth, his life is the point from which all history derives its meaning, from which alone men obtain salvation.

'The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (and we saw his glory, the glory as it were of the only-begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth.' (John 1, 4.)

He, the Son of the Father, the second Person of the most Holy Trinity, is the unique Saviour, who alone speaks with grace and power to men. He is the Word of God and his words have a unique value, for they are the words which God incarnate addresses to men.

This is the key to what is often called the intransigence of the Church. In faith she is aware that his words override any discordant human speech. They do not merely give expression to the aspirations of men but they teach and illuminate, in that they present to man a solution which is the only possible solution, for it is the answer which the Lord of history gives to the questionings of history.

His words are not abstractions, but are a challenge presented by a historical person to historical persons. They are the words of that person who alone speaks with full authority and whose actions are full of power to regenerate. When the Church says to us 'Behold the Lamb of God', what is our response? Whom do we say that he is? If with Peter we reply that he is 'the Christ, the son of the living God', then the whole of our lives must be centred on that truth; every event, every saying must be judged in terms of his words, his standards alone accepted.

Once we have answered with Peter, the implications cannot be avoided. There is no place here for reservations and distinctions:

we may as our spiritual life deepens recognise the presence of such elements in our outlook and behaviour, but we recognise them as imperfections. As Catholic Christians we meet a person whose authority cannot be gainsaid, and that means that we are called upon to embark on a new life, the principles and goal of which are given by God, and made possible by his power.



THE LAMB OF GOD¹

THOMAS AQUINAS

*The next day John saw Jesus coming to him and he saith:
Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who taketh away the
sin of the world. (John I, 29.)*

IN the preceding passage, John had been questioned and had given testimony to Christ. Now he gives further testimony spontaneously, giving the testimony first and then confirming what he had said before, in the words: 'And John gave testimony saying . . .' The circumstances of his giving testimony are described in the first place, followed by his exact words: 'Behold the Lamb of God'; his witness is excluded from suspicion by the words: 'And I knew him not'.

Details of the circumstances are given firstly as to time, where it says, 'The next day', and here the perseverance of St John is especially commended, because he went on giving testimony to our Lord, not upon one day alone, nor even once only, but upon several days and at different times: 'Every day will I bless thee'. (Ps. 144.) His increase in fervour is also commended, for we ought not to allow each succeeding day to pass without variation; it ought to be different from the preceding, which means better, as the Psalmist says: 'They shall go from virtue to virtue.' (Ps. 83, 8.) Other details concern the manner of giving testimony, since 'John saw Jesus'. This implies certainty for an eye-witness is the most trustworthy. Further detail is given about the subject of the witness where the text reads: 'Jesus coming to him', coming, that is to say, from Galilee. (Matth. 3, 13.) This coming of Jesus to St

¹ Translated from St Thomas's commentary on John I, 29, by S. M. Agnes, O.F.