

APPENDIX B

HOMILY, CONVENTION LITURGY

THE THEOLOGIAN: ON PILGRIMAGE WITH CHRIST

“It is an awesome thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” These warning words of St. Paul are stark ones indeed. They conjure up for us the “dangerous memories” to which Johann Baptist Metz made reference last evening; for one thing they suggest more may be required of us than we are prepared to give. But they are doubly awesome to those of us who are summoned to that ministry of the Word proper to the theologian, to we who are called upon to speak and write meaningfully of such a God to our contemporaries. Difficult and challenging enough in ordinary times, this attempt to show who God will be for us and what humankind must be for God, becomes nothing less than precarious in these days of cultural sea-changes.

It may help to note, in the face of the awesomeness of this task, that Christian existence is a pilgrimage, a matter of being “on the way,” that Christianity and even Christ himself were once in ancient times referred to simply as “the way.” We set out, however, not alone but in the company of Christ who is the Great Voyager. If we are indeed pilgrims of the Absolute, Christ is the great Voyager, before us and ahead of us, showing the way. Turned towards him, our life and our work finds its focus there, on He who is God’s own Son. In him does there meet our faith and God’s faithfulness. In life, we can be aimlessly carried along, driven by forces beyond us—or we can deliberately set out on a personal pilgrimage that is acknowledged and embraced. But this means undertaking an inner spiritual voyage with no set itinerary. And if we are to tell God’s people of it—at least if we are to tell of that pilgrimage which Christ himself undertook—we must travel it ourselves. And it is a pilgrimage which takes place in the deep places of our spirit, in that country of the heart whose native language is prayer. Not prayer simply as a means and a method, but as a mode of being, as a living in and with Christ, what St. Paul has in mind when he urges us to “pray without ceasing.” No figure in the Bible before Christ displays this habit of communion with the Father, with the One Jesus calls “Abba.” To not want to pray anymore is to wither away and die as a Christian.

We enter upon this journey as a community of believers, as an ecclesial people (we shall hear more of this in the days to come) with Christ as our companion and fellow-traveler. We set out then aboard the Bark of Peter (this is to fall back upon

another ancient and venerable image—but as theologians we are entrusted with carrying and keeping alive the symbols and myths that articulate and interpret the meaning of the voyage). The Bark of Peter is a fragile ship often tossed about by the turbulent seas, and its fore-image in the Hebrew Scriptures is surely Noah's Ark. Noah was also a voyager, as Abraham and Moses after him were to be. But Noah's Ark was without a rudder. Only something or someone beyond the craft could bring it to safe harbor. And so like him, we must entrust ourselves to the wind—or more exactly to that breath of God which is the Holy Spirit—who teaches us who know not how to pray to cry out "Abba, Father."

This journey is to God as mystery—but Holy Mystery, to God in his incomprehensibility which is the incomprehensibility of love. And love turns on the free disclosure of the beloved who is otherwise inaccessible and hidden. Love cannot be summoned on demand; it comes only as free gift, as unexacted, as grace. It is made manifest for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Here are the sign posts and criteria: Christ encountered in the Gospel story, living for us there; Christ broken and poured out for us in bread and wine; Christ seen in the eyes of everyone we meet. Christ who is the fellow traveler with us and like us; Christ who is very man sharing our limited knowledge, taking the risks of love. He has no blueprint from the Father; He is not an actor reading off a script written beforehand. The *ipsissima vox Jesu* cannot be reduced to the words of a ventriloquist. The quality and the style of his presence to people are something that he works out, with words and deeds that are original, creative, daring and uninhibited—and yet that grow out of his prayerful union with the Father. And so we read the past, that is to say the Gospel accounts, not to find there a preconceived plan, but to receive the Holy Spirit who "breathes where he will." We are indeed called to discipleship of Christ, but in this secular, alien, and wounded world—and in the sometimes frightening order of freedom.

And so this Christian voyage takes us eventually (there is no escaping it) into uncharted waters, or to change the image, into the wasteland, into the dark wood. And there we are brought face to face with our sinful condition. Thomas of Aquin went into that wasteland only three months before he died and when he returned he could neither tell us of it or write anymore. Ironic that his master work, the *Summa*, which proceeds by way of posing questions was left unfinished; a double irony really in that it ended with the question concerning penance.

But even here in our lostness, the wound of transcendence remains on us. And so even here the darkness is the dazzling darkness of God, prompting T. S. Eliot to write, in words that sound like those of David the psalmist:

I said to my soul, be still
and let the dark come upon you,
which shall be the darkness of God.

Like the Israelites of old, wandering about the desert in search of water, we can come about full term in what the Bible calls *metanoia*—far better surely than succumbing to *paranoia*. The God who laid claim on the hearts of the disciples is the same God who claims us. His love is not lessened; his purposes for the world not diminished today. In whatever desolation we find ourselves, we need only wait on God who comes to us "as we are." We need not fear for Christ as the voyager

ahead of us remains the one who "for our sake God made one with the sinfulness of men" (II Cor. 5:21). Thus, Alan Jones can write that "Everything that kills the human heart has been done to death on the Cross"—illustrating that truth with the vivid words of the seventeenth-century mystic and poet, Henry Vaughan:

Death and darkness get you packing,
 Nothing now to man is lacking,
 All your triumphs now are ended,
 And what Adam marred is mended.¹

Thus God is with us—perhaps in the mode of absence—even in apparent failure as he was with Christ on the Cross in the human failure of his mission.

This is the past that we as theologians must reverence and yet ever reinterpret—without any compromise of the most demanding critical scholarship. This is our ministry in that community that lives by faith in "the God who has made the cause of humankind to be his (God's) cause" (Schillebeeckx). If we wait for the future, we do so by shaping it now. For we have the promises of God that like a leaven quickens and renews.

Alan Jones concludes his little book on Christ² by recounting a story from Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*: a group of pilgrims put up for the night in an inn are awakened by peals of laughter coming from one of the rooms occupied by a retired archbishop who is still asleep. When they awaken him he tells them of his dream of Jesus handing men and women up a ladder into heaven, among whom is Lancelot. And he exclaims:

Ah, Jesus mercy! Why did you wake me?
 I was never so merry and well at ease in all my life.

And he laughed and laughed and laughed. And that is the way it will be at the end of the pilgrimage. It all ends with laughter in heaven.

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¹Alan W. Jones, *Journey into Christ* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 138.

²*Ibid.*, p. 139.