

“SEND DOWN THY HOLY SPIRIT”

(A sermon delivered before the celebration of Holy Communion at the Conference of the Church Service Society in Dundee Parish Church (St Mary's) on the 25th September 1978, by the Society's President, the Rev. Professor J. K. S. Reid.)

A sermon should have a text. If I am allowed a motto instead, I should find it in the English translation of the component of the Eucharist called *epiklesis*. In recent Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions, after long absence, this element has been restored in different verbal forms, sometimes just “sanctify”, sometimes in terms of “send”. In Orthodoxy (when rendered in English) at least St Mark and St Chrysostom have “send down”, as do some German Lutheran and Evangelical forms. The Church of Scotland *Book of Common Order*, 1940, and *The Divine Service*, 1973, with great if not entire consistency, use “send down”. The value of this is that it conserves the idea of God Transcendent. I do not think that religion or Christianity can do without this symbol. In face of much contemporary theology, it is time to affirm transcendence as indispensable.

It is Bultmann that set the ball rolling. Modern man does not picture the universe as a three-storey affair, heaven above and hell below and earth in between, as most biblical writers clearly do. He said the Gospel could be stripped of this picture of the cosmos and still remain Gospel. He was quite right — but for a reason he failed to understand, namely that the Bible never allows its cosmology to taint its theology and so give God a location. Then Bultmann destroyed the three-level representation and replaced it by a one-level picture in only two dimensions. Deprived of height and depth, we were invited to enter a country of the blind with transcendence blotted out.

Once set in motion, the ball kept rolling on with increasing momentum. Robinson turned comment into contempt and ridiculed the “god up there”, supposing that the ordinary Christian was incapable of distinguishing between cosmological picture and theological reality.

Other salients of Christian faith came under fire and were successively reduced. Literally reduced — dismantled, and landscaped into the secular scene.

Christ's person — Jesus was so loving that afterwards his friends identified him with God, somehow already known to be thus loving (Wainwright).

Jesus' incarnation is a "mythological story" of the union of God and man (Goulder).

Jesus' work is a "partial overcoming in human lives of the great repudiation of fellowship with God" (Wiles).

The Spirit is just "the continuous incarnation of God as Spirit in the spirits of men" "continuous with its presence in the person of Jesus" (Lampe).

Man's duty is to imitate Jesus the "man for others" (Robinson).

Man's role is to realise his own potentiality, be true to himself, and so be saved (Wainwright).

It is all so very, very *English* — a joint product of the English tradition of philosophical empiricism and Anglican pragmatism. It is hardly theology at all. Theology exists to render credible the incredible, comprehensible the incomprehensible. It is an impossible task, and it is mandatory. It has to "tradition" the faith in terms appropriate and up to date. But *transmit* is quite different from *transmute*; and *traditor* means transmitter and also traitor. Is it betrayal that is taking place here before our eyes?

Peter Berger speaks of the "malaise of selling out to secularism that afflicts current theology"; and Rahner of "cognitive surrender". It is no doubt done with laudable apologetic purpose. It may be that modern man has no need for Transcendent God. But equally he can have no interest in a totally secularised God.

We must use symbols. No symbols are perfect. We must choose the least imperfect. Is it just too old fashioned to reaffirm simple Transcendence as the best and in the last resort the only symbol to represent God, for which there is no substitute?

We are really back at the storm-centre of the centuries-old Eucharistic debate within Protestantism. Is it *we* by our faith that put that "something more" in the elements that makes them sacrament? Or is it *God from above* who does it? — the Transcendent slicing through the self-sufficiency of the world, which is (to use today's in-word) so cosmetic, to invest it with transcendent reality. As happened at Incarnation, at Transfiguration, at Resurrection, and during the blessed forty days before Ascension. It is the best of such inadequate symbols as we have.

So we invoke God Transcendent to send down the Holy Spirit to make the bread "meat indeed" and the wine "drink indeed". We "do this" in obedience, and joy, and expectation; and in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.