

REVELATION IN SAINT PAUL

INTRODUCTION: REVELATION ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Paul of Tarsus was on the way to Damascus, but all of a sudden, in a flash, something very exceptional occurred to him. It was violent and decisive. It was, as he later referred to it, like the first dawn of the world when darkness was superseded by light (2 Cor. 4, 6). This was a new creation, more dazzling than the first. What happened to Paul here was, after Pentecost, the most important event in the life of the infant Church.

Paul's conversion is narrated in the Acts of the Apostles, not once but three times. First we have the detailed account of Luke the historian (Acts 9, 1-23). Then we have it in Paul's own pleading to the Jews after he had been arrested in the Temple in Jerusalem about Pentecost of 57 (Acts 22, 1-21). Finally, there is the least quoted but most circumstantial narrative in Paul's speech to the Roman court of Festus, at which King Agrippa and Queen Berenice were present (Acts 26, 1-19). St. Paul says that in the vision

the Lord answered, '... I have appeared to you for this reason: to appoint you as my servant and as witness of this vision in which you have seen me, and of others in which I shall appear to you. I shall deliver you from the people and from the pagans, to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the dominion of Satan to God, and receive, through faith in me, forgiveness of their sins and a share in the inheritance of the sanctified.'¹

(xxvi, 16, 16-8)

Here we have in a few words Paul's life-long mission: to preach this revelation to the Gentiles, 'the pagans', so that by faith they will have light instead of darkness. Paul's own vision was 'a light brighter than the sun come down from Heaven.' (xxvi, 13)

THE MESSAGE OF THIS REVELATION

In explaining the Christian mystery Paul constantly returned to the vision on the road to Damascus. And if one wants to understand Paul's

¹Scriptural passages are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible*, London, 1966.

message one should constantly return to it too. It explains all the tenets and the details. 'He was taken possession of once and for all', someone wrote. Christ won him over to him, but at the same time He fulfilled Paul's deepest aspirations. 'And last of all he appeared to me too; it was as though I was born when no one expected it' (1 Cor. xv, 8). Woe to him who doubts the reality of this revelation: 'I am an apostle and I have seen Jesus our Lord' (ibid. ix, 1).

This revelation was 'an apocalypse of the Son', an entry into the heavenly world where the risen Christ reigns. It was a painful experience in which the soul was torn by the conversion that ensued. Paul was conquered, but with his own deliberate consent. Jesus Christ, in a flash of self-revelation, dominated the heart of this man. Not only Christ's nature was manifested in this revelation, but the whole meaning of Christ's mission. Jesus was the Saviour, the 'servant of God' whose task was prophesied by the book of Isaiah.

He was the Just One, so he could not have died for his own sins. His death was a sacrifice, an atonement for sin. All the previous offerings of animals prescribed by the Law vanished as meaningless. With the coming of the Saviour everything depends on grace. Everything is received from and through Jesus Christ. Hence, no longer the law saves man, but the risen Christ whose death redeems us from sin. The Son of God, Paul discovered, lives in all those who believe in him; he makes them sharers in his resurrection. Jesus lived in Paul, loved him beyond comparison and made him a new creation: this was Paul's firm belief.

But no sooner had Paul been admitted into the fellowship of the Son, than he became a missionary. The experience of the revelation on the road to Damascus made him a zealous preacher of it. To achieve this he suffered all kinds of ordeals and nothing could abate his entire commitment to it. But it was impossible to exhaust the richness of its message in spite of the closeness of his language as seen in his letters. 'From then on, Paul's whole life was to draw its inspiration from the depths of this experience, and the entire evolution of this thought was linked up, directly or indirectly, with this key-point.'²

APOSTLE OF THE RISEN CHRIST

We saw what was Paul's God-given mission. He was appointed 'servant' and 'witness' of the revelation given to him. Paul did not hesitate: he was aware that his vocation linked him with the prophets, that

² Amédée Brunot, S.C.J., *St Paul and his Message*, p. 30.

is, the inspired teachers, of Israel. He was appointed by Christ to be his prophet to every nation: 'Then he said to me, "Go! I am sending you out to the pagans far away"' (Acts xxii, 21).

Up to his revelation near Damascus his only preoccupation was the Law. 'I followed the strictest party in our religion and lived as a Pharisee' (ibid. xxvi, 5). After it his only passion, his 'folly' was the risen Christ. The Word of God entered his heart. Nothing could resist it, 'When I preach the gospel, I take no credit for that; I act under constraint; it would go hard with me indeed if I did not preach the gospel.' The Word of God was living; it was a Person, the Son of God, the risen Christ.

He repeats his mission in the words that open his letters: 'From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus who has been called to be an apostle, and specially to preach the Good News that God promised long ago through his prophets in the scriptures' (Rom. i, 1-2). 'I, Paul, appointed by God to be an apostle' (1 Cor. i, 1). He was to preach the Gospel, as 'its herald, its apostle and its teacher' (2 Tim. i, 11). He was 'an apostle who does not owe his authority to men or his appointment to any human being, but who has been appointed by Jesus Christ and by God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead' (Gal. i, 1). For him 'the Good News I preach' (Rom. ii, 16), 'the Good News of Christ' (Gal. i, 7) and 'the Good News from God' (Rom. xv, 16) are synonymous. They are one and the same Gospel which he, together with the other apostles, was bound to preach. He took pains to show publicly that his mission was the same as that of the other apostles.

REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST

The apostles did not understand the revelation communicated to them on their own, but understanding was given to them as a result of an interior illumination. To Paul the revelation of Jesus Christ was given when it pleased the Father (Gal. i, 12, 16). The death and resurrection of Christ occupy a central place in the letters of Paul. These facts are the salvation promised formerly to Israel. Christ appeared once and for all to abolish sin by the sacrifice of Himself: 'he has made his appearance once and for all, now at the end of the last age, to do away with sin by sacrificing himself' (Heb. ix, 26). By the appearance of the Saviour, death has been abolished, life and immortality proclaimed through the Gospel (cf. 2 Tim. i, 10).

The Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament were sustained by

the salvific justice of God revealed in Jesus Christ: 'God's justice that was made known through the Law and the Prophets has now been revealed outside the Law, since it is the same justice of God that comes through faith to everyone, Jew and Pagan alike, who believes in Jesus Christ' (Rom. iii, 21-2; cf. i, 17). The mystery hidden to previous generations is uncovered in him, 'the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his saints' (Col. i, 26; cf. Rom. xxi, 26; 1 Tim. iii, 16). God has made known to us 'the mystery of his purpose' (Eph. i, 9), just as he has revealed it to the 'Sovereignities and Powers' (ibid. iii, 10).

It is a revelation of Jesus Christ as much as it is a revelation of the mystery of God. In Christ the Godhead itself is revealed. Creation was the beginning of the manifestation of his invisible perfections; this manifestation was, however, soon removed from the minds of sinful men (Rom. i, 19-25). The Old Testament brought a partial revelation of his glory. Finally, it was revealed by 'God that said, "Let there be light shining out of darkness", who has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ' (2 Cor. iv, 6). Thus was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed and all mankind shall see it' (xl, 5).

The gospel of the apostle is no human invention (cf. Gal. i, 11); it reverberates the Word of God; 'it is the power of God saving all who have faith' (Rom. i, 16). Paul makes known 'the mystery of the gospel' (Eph. vi, 19), and he unveils before everyone the hidden purpose of the mystery which was previously hidden (ibid. iii, 9), but now revealed. This is the meaning of the apostolic word: 'it communicates divine revelation to men to lead them to faith which will guarantee their salvation.'³

The unique importance of faith, however, lasts only for some time. It is based on 'the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind' (Tit. iii, 4). It continues even though the Redeemer has already entered his glory. It will end with 'the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus' (ibid. ii, 13). This last revelation of Jesus is the object of Christian hope: 'so that you will not be without any of the gifts of the Spirit while you are waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed' (1 Cor. i, 7; cf. Rom. viii, 24-5; 2 Thess. i, 7-8).

³Xavier Leon-Dufour, S.J., *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 445.

Complete revelation will be achieved when Christ, the head shepherd, the source of life, is manifested; then, we too will be manifested with him in glory, 'when Christ is revealed — and he is your life — you too will be revealed in all your glory with him' (Col. iii, 4). As Père Teilhard de Chardin contemplated and expounded in his works, the whole of creation is aspiring for this escathological revelation:

The whole creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons. It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose, it was made so by God; but creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first-fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free. (Rom. viii, 19-23)

This final revelation will be a mysterious event, impossible to be described, after which faith and hope will be absorbed by love (1 Cor. xiii, 12; 2 Cor. v, 7).

CHRIST THE REDEEMER

There is a universal reign of sin in the world. From the fall of the first man, sin entered the world. Then the fall of men is multiplied. Hence they are enslaved to sin: 'Jews and Greeks are all under sin's dominion' (Rom. iii, 9). However, though they cannot free themselves from this bondage, yet they are not abandoned (Eph. ii, 4-8). An eternal plan shows the mission of the Son sent for our salvation (Gal. iv, 4). God the Father reconciled the world with himself by the death of his Son (Rom. v, 10; 2 Cor. v, 19). Thus the initiative of reconciliation came from God; an initiative which is free and which reveals to us divine love (Rom. v, 8). This reconciliation takes place by the mediation of Christ, who bought us by the price of his blood.

This redemption takes its full perspectives from the passages in the Old Testament where Yahweh is seen as the redeemer of his people. This redemption had a double aspect: liberation and alliance. Yahweh bought Israel by delivering it from the slavery of Egypt in order to make it his people. Christ delivered the new Israel from the slavery of sin thus making the people his own. Hence Saint Paul attributes the title

of Saviour not only to God the Father (1 Tim. i, 1; ii, 3), but also to Christ (Phil. iii, 20; 2 Tim. i, 10).

Christ redeemed us by offering himself to us as a sacrifice. Saint Paul compares Christ with the paschal lamb: 'Christ, our passover, has been sacrificed' (1 Cor. v, 7). 'Sacrificed' suggests that the death on the cross is a sacrificial immolation. In another letter we find Christ considered as a priest offering the sacrifice: 'giving himself up in our place as a fragrant offering and a sacrifice to God' (Eph. v, 2). The sacrifice of Christ is also that of the new alliance; the sacrifice of him who has shed his blood for the expiation of our sins.

The first Christian sermon deals with the death and resurrection of Christ as if they are inseparable. Justification may be attributed to the resurrection (Rom. iv, 25) and to the blood of Christ (ibid. v, 9). Baptism is at once baptism to the death and to the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection of Christ is presented by Saint Paul as a corporeal and spiritual resurrection. The resurrected body of Christ is celestial, glorious and spiritual (1 Cor. xv, 42-4).

There is a very close connection between salvation attained by the death and resurrection of Christ and the mystery of the Church. It is by the Cross that reconciliation between Jews and pagans is achieved: Christ makes these two groups one people and reconciles them with God as one Body (Eph. ii, 14-8). The resurrected Christ sits at the right hand of the Father (Col. iii, 1). He is the Lord (Rom. x, 9; 1 Cor. xii, 3). This Lordship is exercised not only on the Church of which he is the head (Eph. i, 22); it is exercised on the whole of creation: 'But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (Phil. ii, 9-11).

This universal primacy of Christ is expressed clearly in the texts relating to the mystery. The object of the mystery long time hidden in God and today revealed is to unite, to recapitulate in Christ all that exists in heaven and on earth (Eph. i, 10). Thus the person and the work of Christ are considered not only from the soteriological, but also from the cosmic point of view. For the Apostle, the Redemption, crowned by the triumph of the paschal exaltation, has placed the human nature of Christ as the head, not only of all humanity, but also of all

the created universe, indirectly interested to the salvation as it was to the fall (Rom. viii, 19-23; 1 Cor. xv, 20-8). Christ, head of all the universe, exercises a primacy on all the heavenly spirits. Saint Paul certainly does not think that there will be a final salvation for the demoniac spirits, but rather a victory over them.⁴

Such is the teaching of saint Paul on Redemption: all men are sinners; but the Father reconciled the world by the mediation of his Son, Christ, the new Adam.

PAULINE LANGUAGE

Saint Paul's mission is to announce the good news of the mystery revealed by God. The theme of *mystery* and *good news* is the main theme saint Paul uses to reach to the core of revelation. God casts light on (φατίζειν), unveils (ἀποκαλύπτειν), makes manifest (φανερούειν), makes known (γνωρίζειν). The apostles speak (λαλέειν), teach (διδάσκειν), preach (κηρύσσειν), announce the good news (καταγγέλλειν), give witness (μαρτυρεῖν), and thus communicate the word (λόγος), the preaching (κήρυγμα), the witness (μαρτύριον), the mystery (μυστήριον), the Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον).

In Christ, the mystery which was previously hidden and kept secret (μυστήριον), is now revealed and unveiled (ἀποκαλύπτειν), made manifest (φανεροῦν). This mystery has been brought to the knowledge (γνωρίζειν) of the nations through the preaching (κήρυγμα) of the Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον), in order to lead them to faith (πίστις) and obedience (ὕπακοή). In the epistle to the Colossians Paul sums up: 'I became the servant of the Church when God made me responsible for delivering God's message to you, the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his saints' (Col. i, 26-6).

His mission was to preach the Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον). 'It was God who decided that we were fit to be entrusted with the Good News' (1 Thess. ii, 4), which is 'the Good News from God' (Rom. xv, 16; i, 1; 2 Cor. xi, 7; 1 Thess. ii, 2, 8-9) because God was its author and object. This Gospel was also 'Christ's Good News' (Rom. xv, 19-20; 2 Cor. ii, 12; x, 14; Gal. 8, 7; Phil. i, 27), or 'the Good News of our Lord Jesus' (2 Thess. i, 8), or 'the Good News of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor. iv, 4).

⁴cf. P. Benoit, *Épîtres de la captivité*, Bible de Jérusalem, p. 78.

For Good News Saint Paul sometimes uses the term 'word' or 'message' (λόγος) full of the same meaning and Christian message (Col. i, 26). It is 'God's message' (1 Thess. ii, 13) or 'the word of God' (1 Cor. xiv, 36) or 'the word of the Lord' (1 Thess. i, 8) or 'the Lord's message' (2 Thess. iii, 1) or 'the word of Christ' (Rom. x, 17). Through the word, which is the message of God on human lips, it is God who speaks and invites the hearers: 'But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher' (Rom. x, 14).

The apostle thanks God because the Thessalonians received the word he preached to them 'for what it really is, God's message and not some human thinking' (1 Thess. ii, 13). This word is divine, hence it is dynamic. It is 'the word of truth' (2 Cor. vi, 7; Eph. i, 13; Col. i, 5; 2 Tim. ii, 15), 'the word of life' (Phil. ii, 16). Its object is reconciliation and salvation and it leads to life (Rom. i, 16; 1 Cor. i, 21; 1 Thess. ii, 13). God works in a twofold manner: he effects the reconciliation of the world through Christ, and establishes the word of reconciliation: 'In other words, God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's faults against them, and he has entrusted to us the news that they are reconciled' (2 Cor. v, 19). This leads us to consider the most difficult and the most profitable aspect of revelation in saint Paul — the Pauline mystery.

THE MYSTERY OF THE REDEMPTION

The theology of saint Paul centers on Christ the Saviour, with the fundamental intuition summed up in the term *mystery*. The full development of the implications of this term is achieved in the captivity letters: there it is the divine plan of salvation as realised through Christ. However, even in the first letter to the Corinthians saint Paul writes on the 'mysterious' character of the economy of salvation: its wisdom was secret, hidden in God and totally supernatural, that is its object is the splendour and glory that God has prepared for his elect (1 Cor. ii, 7-8). To the Romans he writes on 'the revelation of a mystery kept secret for endless ages' (Rom. xvi, 25), and he ends the letter rejoicing that this mystery 'must be broadcast to pagans everywhere to bring them to the obedience of faith' (xvi, 26).

The mystery is now unveiled. Before this, the pagans were thought to be banned from salvation, reserved for Jews. But now the 'hope of

glory' for pagans union through with Christ is revealed (Col. i, 25-8). 'It means that pagans now share the same inheritance, that they are parts of the same body, and that the same promise has been made to them, in Christ Jesus, through the gospel' (Eph. iii, 6). In the same letter we find that the mystery is the re-union of all creatures in Christ, the submission of all men to Christ — 'everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth' (i, 10).

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