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THE GENTLE UNDERSTATEMENT OF LOVE

A Meditation on the Lord's Supper

EMILE CAILLIET

Take . . . This is my body which is broken for you . . . This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you. Luke 22:19-20

THE beauty and uniqueness of the Gospel lie in this, that its proclamation when at all adequate is best summed up as the gentle understatement of Love. The wonder for example is not in the fact that our Lord pardoned Peter, but in the way he thrice asked him, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" and then fully restored him with the serene assignment, "Feed my lambs . . . Feed my sheep."

This beauty and uniqueness of the Gospel pertain to the whole of the incarnate life of our Lord, nay, to the very miracle of the Incarnation as summed up in the basic assertion that God was in Christ. Seen aright, it is the whole of this incarnate life from the manger of Bethlehem to the Cross of Calvary which constitutes the gentle understatement of Love. Think of the lowly birth in the stable; of the baptism in the Jordan; of the call to fishermen and tax-gatherers; of the talk with the woman of Samaria; of the ministry of healing to humble folk; of the homage to the Centurion; of the unassuming ways of forgiving again and again; of feeding the multitudes; of warning against despising the little ones; of telling homely parables; of dining with publicans; of washing the disciples' feet . . .

Truly the very core of the Gospel is

reached the moment a man realizes that the "Good News" lies in the intimation of a Lord who is "gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and plentiful in mercy," anxious lest any of his children should perish, eager that they should have life, and have it abundantly. Moreover, he knows that man falls an easy prey to temptation. What we have in the opening pages of the Book of Genesis in this context is a highly colored presentation of man's plight, namely the fact that one created to live in fellowship with God is enticed to live in alienation from God, and this in a created world where the God of the 139th Psalm is nearer than hands and feet. No cleavage, no disruption is at stake in this situation, no fatal necessity. To see things otherwise is to read the tragic view of pagan drama back into Scripture, with the result that unbearable guilt complexes become conducive to harsh legalism and to unhealthy introspection. The fact is that our Christian circles today are plagued by attitudes of self-debasement which border more on the pathological than on the evangelical. True Christian humility is the humility of a son, humility before God. The glory of it all, however, is that God never meant to turn this humility into humiliation. This is why he came to us in the form of a Servant, of a Servant whose power of persuasion spares our infirmity by mere recourse to the gentle understatement of Love.

We have missed the deeper meaning of the Lord's Supper in the measure as

we have allowed the sacrament to be taken out of this context, often to be made into a pretext. First, a pretext to keep away individuals singled out as notorious evil-doers. These, it is felt, should not presume to approach the Lord's table unless they repent, then make proper retribution to those they so obviously have wronged. The least that should be expected is that they should profess their honest purpose to comply as soon as this may conveniently be done. And so a privilege has occasionally been granted the self-righteous in a sanctuary decently arrayed for the administration of a forbidding sacrament. Old Roger Chillingworth might well have a reserved place in the front pew at the time of so exclusive a celebration, in spite of that "something ugly and evil in his face" giving "evidence of man's faculty of transforming himself into a devil," as Nathaniel Hawthorne puts it. Pray God Chillingworth never accedes to the pulpit, or the manse!

There admittedly is danger in unworthy participation in the Lord's Supper. Hence a long established practice of self-examination in the light of God's holy commandments. We shall soon hear the familiar words, "Ye who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in His holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God." Whereupon should follow what the Order for the Celebration calls an acknowledgment of "our manifold sins."

The very comprehensiveness of this confession of "our manifold sins" may cause us to miss the gentle understatement

of Love which truly makes of the Communion Service an epitome of the Gospel of God. The overall impression left by this general confession is that it somehow *entitles* us to partake of the sacrament. The plain truth is that the sole reason we *may* partake of the sacrament is that we have been graciously invited to do so. Supposing we fully take this into account, a new danger is likely to dog our steps even then, namely a sense of self-gratification at having accepted the invitation. We had to, anyway. No feigned excuse could possibly avail, we knew, at the bidding of so unique a Host, whether a piece of ground had been bought, new yokes of oxen had to be tried, or a wife had been married. We have moreover had the tact to realize how grievous and unkind a thing it would have been to have kept away from a table so lavishly provided, that it lacks nothing but the invited guests.

Such intricacies have hidden from us the further truth—I was going to say, the blunt, naked fact—that the only ground for the invitation in the first place is that God justifies the ungodly. He bids them come. He bids them come just as they are, and even goes to the length of providing the proper garment. He bids them come though they hardly dare hope for anything but condemnation. He bids them come though despair may be brooding over them, pressing upon their heart like a horrible nightmare. He so loved the world that he GAVE . . . Ah, this is the hitch! He gave, while the hardest thing for man is to do nothing but receive. This is what makes faith so hard, for to have faith is to receive, to receive as only a candid child can receive. Old Tacitus knew about this. He said somewhere in his *Annals* (IV, 18) that "good things

bestowed are pleasing to one only so long as he thinks he can return the favor; as soon as they go beyond this, however, gratitude yields to hatred." The trouble with Tacitus is that he had been so badly informed around the year A.D. 100, that in his reference to one "whom the procurator Pontius Pilate had caused to be executed during the reign of Tiberius," he apparently took "Christ" for a proper name. He did not know the name "Jesus" at all. His reference to Christianity moreover was to "this scourge" which originated in Judea, then sprang up again as a pernicious superstition in Rome, "whither everything horrible and shameful pours in from all over the world and finds a ready vogue" (*Annals*, XV, 44). We need not pause to lament the plight of a city whose innocence could so easily be defiled. What is of interest is the naturalistic context of the judgment rendered by Tacitus with regard to man's instinctive abhorrence of overwhelming benevolence. This context provides the proper setting for a study in contrast between the self-vindication of a pagan pride on the one hand, and on the other the childlike receptivity of a faith exulting in God's munificence. It is the natural man, therefore, the pagan within us who shrinks from divine bounty.

Our sensitivity may further be sharpened as the personal character of the gift of grace is magnified. Heed this eager insistence in the words of institution now singled out for the sake of emphasis: "Take . . . This is my body which is broken *for you* . . . This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed *for you*." The way a man responds to this divine pointer discloses the measure of his faith. At the climactic moment of "The Mystery of

Jesus," Pascal heard the Crucified One say to him, "I thought of thee in my agony; I have shed such drops of blood for thee." . . . He then crumbled at the foot of the Cross, uttering the words of ultimate surrender, "Lord, I give thee all." Most, if not all of us, still linger far behind so holy a dedication. The best that can be said of us is that this more directly personal understanding of our Lord's words makes us unbearably uneasy. And yet the new stress just laid upon the words of institution is invited by the Lord himself. As we hear them afresh they are pointed directly at each one of us: ". . . broken *for thee* . . . shed *for thee*."

By this time, our life is acted upon like those seeds exposed to X-rays. Mutations are called out. A velleity of self-vindication faintly moves our lips: "Have I not in all candor confessed my sins, Lord? Thou knowest I truly repent." This imperfect volition is of no avail, except for a vague awareness of its futility. What matters is that the look of the Lord is now upon us. We dare not look up, and yet we know what that look is like. Such must have been the luminous gaze that overwhelmed Peter when the Lord said to him for the third time, "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" For this is the same impression that overwhelms us at the moment the invitation takes on a personal overtone and these words and phrases emerge to haunt us: "*Take . . . broken for thee . . . shed for thee*," in a silent confrontation.

Then, under the enigmatic tenderness of that gaze, as the invitation is represented to us as almost an allusion to our condition, there suddenly flashes upon us, "unforeseen and unsought"—as Schweitzer might put it—the insight, "Broken by *whom*, Lord? And

who caused thy blood to be shed?" How amazing the kaleidoscopic simultaneity of the scenes a man will suddenly behold, once he has been put on his mettle in a crisis situation! I once faced a German firing squad only to be saved by a miracle, and I think I know.

"Broken for me . . . Broken by whom? Shed for me . . . Who caused that blood to be shed?" The flash and outbreak of an oppressed conscience leave us hopelessly beholding the disciples asleep while the man Christ Jesus is left alone to the wrath of God Almighty; beholding Jesus betrayed with a kiss by one of his own, in the dark; Jesus mocked, smitten, struck on the face, spat upon, crowned with thorns; the populace in league with the rulers and the chief priests crying out all at once, saying Away with this man, release unto us Barrabas; Jesus crucified between two thieves; Jesus in torment amid blasphemy and derision; his disciples scattered abroad, running for their lives. . . .

"Surely, Lord, had I been there I should not have joined in that desertion; not joined in that betrayal; not joined in that blasphemy and denial of all justice . . ."

Yet my heart is no longer in that protestation of loyalty. And all this while the same look is still upon me that was upon Peter when for the third time he heard the question, Lovest thou me?

Out with the sin that lieth at the door! Each time I have indulged in gossip, envy, cheating or backbiting, each and every time I secretly have rejoiced in iniquity, in some form of harm done to others or suffered by them, I have broken *that* body, caused *that* blood to be shed. I seem to hear a dis-

tant hammering, a driving of nails through those hands that were raised only to serve, to heal or to bless. Now I *know* that the man I have been has had a part in that hammering over there. Nay, as out of the whirlwind the piercing dart, the thrust of Nathan to David has struck me also:

"Thou *art* the man!"

How petty in this situation, how inadequate, however sincere and well-intentioned, the general confession of my sins which precluded my partaking of Communion! How sordid my rebukes to those who are in truth my fellow-sinners! Remember Baudelaire's Dedication to the Reader of his *Flowers of Evil*?

—To thee, hypocrite, my fellow-creature, my brother!

Broken by whom, this, our Lord's body? Who caused this blood to be shed? We are all in this evil thing to the hilt, each and everyone of us. We have had intimations of this fact in our best moments. It is high time that we should see it the way it is:

"Thou *art* the man!"

The point however is that our Lord never said it, never intimated the fact. And down to this day he merely gives, saying: "Take . . . This is my body which is broken for you . . . This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." And that same mysterious tenderness is still on his face. As you accept his invitation this evening, the blessing of that same unassuming look will be upon you, that was upon Peter—the third time. May you then be granted the grace to discern in his words of institution the gentle understatement of the Love "which moves the Sun and the other stars."