THE OLD MAN LUTHER

On a Tuesday morning in March 1647 the Presbyterian and Congregationalist Fathers of the Westminster Assembly had gathered as usual in the Jerusalem Chamber in Westminster Abbey when they were interrupted by a message from the House of Lords bidding them consider publishing an English translation of Luther's *Last Discourses*. Perhaps not unwilling to be diverted - it was after all their 808th session - they turned aside to see this strange sight, and appointed a high-powered committee to deal with the matter, led by Herbert Palmer, President of Queens', Cambridge, including dons, DDs, the great Ecumaniac, John Dury, and the ministers of the French churches in London and Canterbury.

It was perhaps too strong a committee, for when it met it subcontracted the business of reading the book to a small group which reported on 21st April that, though Luther was a man 'whose praise is throughout all the churches of Christ' and though the work contained 'many good things' yet there were many passages 'contrary to gravity and modesty'. Indeed the effect was as though a volume of *Private Eye* were suddenly intruded into the agenda of a General Assembly. No doubt the Revd Obadiah Sedgewick summed it up when he reported, 'I do find many good things, but some of the oddest concerns: I never met with the like', while the Master of Jesus, Cambridge, more severely said it contained 'nothing of use'. But despite this unanimous adverse judgment, an order from the House of Commons decreed in the following February that the work should be printed.

They were not in fact Luther's last words, but a translation of the Lauterbach edition of the *Table Talk* which had been done into vigorous seventeenth-century English, not many yards from the Jerusalem Chamber, in the Gatehouse prison just outside the Abbey by Captain Henry Bell, son of a Dean of Ely and a mercenary soldier, who found, unlike his fellow prisoner, the poet Lovelace, that stone walls did indeed a prison make and iron bars a cage. (When the book appeared in 1652 Captain Bell, a trooper in Colonel Whalley's famous regiment, had died in battle north of the Border. Since he had earlier submitted the manuscript to Archbishop Laud, whose judgment was astonishingly similar to that of the Puritan fathers, with deference to Professor Elton I do not think what put them off was anti-Presbyterian theology but that into Luther's theology cheerfulness keeps breaking in).

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'Volo esse miles emeritus' - the sigh lingers over the last years of Luther's life, when he was a tired old man, aged before his time by the immense strains of the great church struggle, the care of his churches, the prodigious effort of writing something like a treatise a fortnight over twenty-five years, causing him to complain that he had not time to think - a great ferment of mental energy we cannot begin to measure. But not for him like an old war-horse to be put

out to grass. For those whom Bunyan called 'the Champions' there is no let up, to the very end.

We cannot drive a wedge between the young, the middle-aged and the old Luther. In his last lectures, sermons and letters he returns time and again to the same themes, sometimes in a tired, but never in a petrified way. Even in the matter of polemic, I doubt if the old Luther uses a single three letter word or pungent metaphor which he had not used thirty years before. 'God has led me like an old blind horse', said Luther. He let history come to him, where God has set him, and so in the last decade of his life he went on lecturing, preaching and writing. We begin with the lectures which Professor Luther gave on Holy Scripture in these years (with frequent interruptions) from June 1535 to December 1545.

They have been called Luther's swan song and Melanchthon claimed that these last lectures of Luther are much plainer, much nearer to human life than his earlier lectures. Indeed, they merit the phrase 'Ripeness is all', for into them he put a great deal of hard work, and the experience of a lifetime of preaching, pastoral care, and his own fight of faith. He had carefully studied the text when translating his German Bible, and he now went over it again with Augustine, Nicholas of Lyra and Paul of Burgos. He stuck to the literal sense, deploring allegory, with one or two lapses of his own. Yet the fundamental framework of his hermeneutic is very similar to that of his great series on the Psalms thirty years before. He had long abandoned the mediaeval 'quadriga', yet the four-fold framework still underlies his work: the literal prophetic - God's work 'for us'; the tropological and figurative - God's work 'in us'; the solidarity of the Church; and lastly the eternal and eschatological dimension. He brought to it wider studies - maps, geographies (ancient and humanist), and chronology, which had become an almost obsessive hobby, as he tried to place the patriarchs within the span of world history.

Though he would not evade difficulties by allegorizing, he had no means of distinguishing between history, myth, saga and legend and no notion at all of historical development. And though he pours contempt on some of the readings of the rabbis, there are passages of his own which seem grotesque to a modern reader. Genesis he sees in the context of the 11th chapter of Hebrews. Accordingly it is the great hall of the Pioneers of Faith, with his successive portraits - Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and his women, Eve, Sarah, Rebecca - having something of the depth and grandeur of Michelangelo's prodigious figures in the Sistine Chapel.

About the state of mankind before the Fall, he writes some engaging science fiction. And he puts back into the golden age the kind of speculation modern men put into the distant future.

> Adam's inner and outer sensations were of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best and his will was the most straightforward... without any fear of death or anxiety... I am convinced that before Adam's sin

> his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle.

(It has been said that an eagle can read *The Times* from ten miles away and Luther's Adam, one feels, could have done the Crossword in the same glance).

> He was stronger than lions or bears whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we handle puppies... I believe Adam could command a lion with a single word, just as we give command to a trained dog... Eve speaks to a serpent with as little fear as we have when we speak to a charming little bird or a lively puppy.

A comparison between Luther and Milton's *Paradise Lost* is interesting. C. S. Lewis has pointed out that for Milton Adam and Eve are public as well as private persons. Where they dwell is a White House or Buckingham Palace. Once in a lifetime, C. S. Lewis said, we might have been taken to see Adam like some living Lincoln Memorial, and bow before the father of our race. Luther's chronological puzzling led him to believe that in the age of Methuselah at least eight such Grand Old Men were still alive, and he pictures Eve meditating her great brood of descendants, much as Queen Victoria regarded the British Empire.

But if there are similarities with Milton there are differences which tilt in Luther's favour. Milton's God is like the famous headmaster, 'a beast but a just beast'. Luther's is a God who plays games with his children because in the end 'What are all of us but God's children?' and his justice is undergirded with compassion. If Milton's great Book IX is a more exact account of Genesis, Luther turns the law swiftly into premonition of the gospel: he thinks the famous Protevangelium, the promise to Eve that the serpent's heel would be bruised, came within a few hours of the Fall. He stresses both how the sense of condemnation came from the guilty consciences of Adam and Eve, and how God brought good from evil. Here in Luther's Genesis, then, is not Yahweh but the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Eve as the great Queen Mother of the human race, like the other women in his portrait gallery, may be a riposte against the Catholic view of celibacy, but her portraiture is used to bring out positively the qualities of wives and mothers.

> I often wonder at the way the female body was created for the purpose of nurturing children. How prettily even little girls carry babies on their bosoms. As for mothers, see how deftly they move whenever a crying baby has to be quietened or put in a cot. Get a man to do the same thing, and you will see a camel dancing, so clumsily will he do all the simplest jobs a baby demands.

From Adam and Eve he moves on to Noah, to the quality of patience, of faithful obedience under ridicule and reproach. For

Noah embodies Luther's Three Hierarchies of authority and government:

> Noah was a bishop: it was his first concern to oppose the Devil and comfort the tempted, to restore the erring and to give confidence to the wavering, to encourage the despairing, shut out the impenitent... and receive back the penitent with fatherly joy... He had his civil tasks because he established the state and formulated laws... In addition there was the management of his own home, the care of his household.

Abraham is a full length portrait, the emblem of Faith. Apart from Kierkegaard's 'Fear and Trembling', I know no better meditation on the sacrifice of Isaac. And when Luther has done with him, it is with a kind of reverent awe:

> In addition to Abraham's heroic qualities of faith, hope and love, the Holy Spirit also praises him for his civil qualities, reverence, humility, modesty, moderation and justice... in Abraham there is a host of all virtues... nothing surpasses his faith. How great was his love, even to the Sodomites, how patient his exile, how great his reverence and generosity towards the lords of the land... the whole doctrine of ethics could be gathered better from this source than Aristotle, the lawyers and the canonists have propounded it.

Luther's Abraham is a grave and reverend signor whom we encounter in his middle life. But his Joseph is a wonderful picture of a young man. As Abraham is the emblem of faith, so Joseph images the divine forgiveness. Luther does not miss a trick when unfolding to us, moment by moment, the beautiful narrative of Joseph's reconciliation with his brethren and his father.

Luther's important notion of 'larvae', the masks behind which God both hides himself and handles his creation, are shown here as terrifying mis-guises behind which God manifests and through which he displays his loving purpose finally revealed in his Son. That the God whom the patriarchs met and trusted is indeed the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ was a theological commonplace but perhaps few sixteenth-century writers have so sensitively and delicately traced the Christlike quality of God's dealing with men in the primitive days. The games we play, our little psychological ploys, are as nothing, Luther seems to say, compared with God's great game of saving men and reconciling them to himself. Luther has done what some of us have done, teased an insect, say a caterpillar, by putting a large leaf in its way to see whether it would go over or round, and then moving it along, further ahead in its path. This, says Luther, is how God deals with us.

> For God behaves towards his saints just as Joseph behaved towards his brethren... he pretends and feigns to be a

> tyrant... not because he is estranged and his heart is hostile, but because it is brotherly and gentle, and with no other end than to put their penitence to the test and so to drive them to acknowledge their sin and the mercy of God.
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> God plays the same game with the world... in the Father's wisdom, the Incarnate God plays with, takes delight in behaving in this winning and kindly way with men and this game affords him the greatest pleasure.

Into these lectures he fits all the evangelical stresses of his Reformation. Although the patriarchs were in a sense bishops and priests and ministers of the Word, the fundamental quality is their faith and their obedience. They are not simply Ecclesiastical Man, Political Man, Domestic Man. The inwardness of true religion, its independence from external form, is shown here, where Abraham truly worships under a tree, and Jacob on a pillow of stone.

Esau and Jacob, so important for Paul and Augustine, are also important for Luther's doctrine of the church, as he too sees the story of the People of God in chiaroscuro, with the dialectic between the true and false church running through the whole story.

To the story of Isaac, and Rebecca, who has a Lady Macbeth side to her, Luther brings the note of cliff-hanging suspense during the Great Deception, the moment when a sweating Jacob waits to know if the great sting has come off.

> He began to sweat profusely and silently to find fault with his mother's plan. 'O dear mother,' he said, 'What have you done? To what have you driven me?' At that point I would have let that dish of pottage fall and I would have run away as though my head was on fire. Then I would have got rid of the dish, and made a bolt for it.

Nor does Luther let us forget that Jacob was a very frightened little man:

> It pleases me to hear of the weakness of the saints... The fact that David killed Goliath, a bear, a lion, does not edify me much, for I can't imitate such things... but when examples of weakness, sins, fear, and trials are shown us... these lift me up in a wonderful way... for I see how they did not perish but were buoyed up with the promises given to them and from this I conclude there is no need for me to despair either. For in all this struggle with hell, in fears and struggles of conscience they feel and speak as though they had no promises at all. Nevertheless they are preserved and maintained by the Word.

Genesis explained the holiness of the secular order. The Fathers of the Old Testament did not run away from the world. They did not need to become nuns or monks. They exercised their calling in the estate where God had called them: in the home, in the fields,

and in their daily business with their fellow men. Those primary human relations of man and wife, parent and child, grounded in love and faithfulness, determine the relations of children when they grow up, the fidelities of courtship and married life. It is this common life of ordinary men and women which is surrounded by the provident care and mercy of God that is our training ground for heaven. Above all it is a life where men and women learn, out of their pains and sorrows and temptations, to find the sheer mercy of God. Throughout these lectures grace is flowing like a river - now swift, now slow; now sunny, now shadowed; but always loving, for it is this stream, 'flumen est', which makes glad the city of God. If in these pages Luther sees simony as the most deadly of all sins, and if he seems to reduce the errors of all religions, including the Christian, to this, and if here is found the root of the false church, it is because what matters supremely is not a question of cheap or costly grace, but simply Grace. The love of God has no strings attached, and all the rest is what he calls 'Bockmilch' religion. It is like trying to milk a goat, to wring salvation out of God. But this is no subjectivism, for he will have nothing to do with unmediated religion. We cannot meet 'Deus Nudus' face to face in His holiness and majesty. Rather he meets us in the Incarnate Son and his presence comes to us in 'larvae', which partly hide, partly reveal and always remain the instruments of his merciful and saving action. Such 'larvae' are the Word and Sacraments.

It is well known that the lectures were worked over by hearers and editors, most of them pupils of Melanchthon, and Peter Meinhold, in a classic study, suggested they may have been bowdlerised here and there. And there are passages where, for example, the state of the soul after death is argued in a philosophic manner.

Luther's own view was much simpler. He would have appreciated Stanley Spencer's splendid pictures where jolly sailors and hefty barmaids clamber over gravestones in the shadow of a Glasgow gas works. 'I shall go to sleep', he said, 'and the next thing I shall know will be when an angel knocks on my tomb - "Dr Luther, Dr Luther, (for God will call us up each by name) time to get up. Judgment Day!'

By and large no other reformer could have given us these lectures. Often boring (there was a discussion of circumcision which must have gone on for months), monotonous, repetitive, they are uneven in quality. Yet into them he packs animadversions on church and world, on contemporary Germany, on human nature and the ways of men, rather in the manner of the *Adages* of Erasmus. There are some good personal touches also: 'I would not have done that... This is how I used to think'.

Above all he is the doctor of conscience. In all concerning sin, guilt, and forgiveness, he is magisterial. Yet this is not a sad or sombre commentary. In it, there recurs, time and again, the theme of joy.

We should ask God to give us a joyful heart for such joyful

> promises in order that we too may exult and be glad with saintly Abraham because we are the People of God. But oh the wretched and corrupt flesh which restrains the spirit and does not let us laugh... if the flesh did not hamper us and we were true Christians, we could sing nothing during our entire life, but the Magnificat, Confitemini, the Gloria in Excelsis, the Sanctus.

So, every Monday, every Tuesday at seven or eight in the morning, Luther lectured on Genesis until the story ended for him with the death of his young hero, Joseph, dying at last in venerable old age, buried in a tomb which would remind his descendants to persevere in the same faith and promises, in which he had fallen asleep and been gathered to his fathers. So on Tuesday 17th November 1545 Martin Luther put down his notes for the last time with the poignant comment:

> Here is my dear Genesis. God grant that others after me may make a better job of it. I can do no more. I am weak. Pray God for me that he will grant me a good and blessed last hour.

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In the last Act of John Osborne's play *Martin Luther,* he brings Staupitz back to the Black Cloister in Wittenberg (he had in historical fact been dead for some years) simply to make him comment on the loneliness of what had once been the thronged life of the Augustinian monastery. 'It's so odd. The place was full of men. And now there's only you and Katy. It's very, very strange'. Strange indeed, and quite untrue. We know of one travelling scholar who was warned not to stay with the Luthers because their home was always crowded out. The house was full: unmarried and unmarriable spinsters, convalescents, derelict widows, refugee pastors, orphaned children, undergraduate boarders, ushers with their pupils, scholars, foreigners. It was a bustling Liberty Hall which often brought the mistress of the house to anger and near despair. There were very few of those blessed moments when a husband and wife look at one another in the silence and sigh with relief that all their guests have gone! And not least from 1530 onwards there were scribes who wrote down his conversation, so that breakfast and dinner became mini-Rotary club affairs. It was their memories which became the staple of Henry Bell's Table Talk. When James Boswell in one of his sublimely silly moments sprawled all over the tomb of Melanchthon in Wittenberg to write a 'Wish you were here' note to Samuel Johnson, he never mentioned Luther, whom he thought Johnson would dislike. But in fact 'Luther and Samuel Johnson' would make a very profitable article. Both were sages, worth listening to, worth recording, though Luther's utterances have unhappily been deprived of that 'Sitz in Leben' which is half the fun in Boswell.

Their friends tended to show them off, at worst as though they were performing bears. Each could be boorishly rude, each could be

generous, wise, and full of pawky humour, so offensive to the pious ease of the Revd Obadiah Sedgewick and the Westminster Fathers. Sometimes Luther would sit silent through a meal but often at breakfast he would kick off with 'Well, what's the news?' and once off the mark would oblige with an astonishing range of anecdote and observation, gossip and invective.

And in the background was Kate Luther, one of his better sparring partners. She was the manager, and kept him from giving everything away. For he had not venality in him and died poorer than Erasmus. Others made fortunes from his books and bibles but he got nothing and at the end of his life was grateful for a small pension from the King of Denmark. He bought one or two small properties but the biggest deal was when his wife was able to buy her brother's farm at Zuladorf with a few cattle and pigs. 'Luther and Pigs' is an interesting minor theme, for they had for him some of the affectionate fascination of Lord Emsworth for the Empress of Blandings.

Like many elderly people he thought the world was getting worse, that seasons were more inclement, and trees not so long lived. The older historians talked about 'Weltpessimismus' but today we might call Luther a Doomwatcher, contemplating the sins of men, of which the decay in manners and morals, and the growing violence, were true signs of the end of time.

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Dürer's great picture of the Apocalypse reminds us that there was an apocalyptic setting to the sixteenth century's view of history. In an age of conflict Luther thought more about this in his last years: his great enemies, the Turk, the Pope and the Devil, all now become part of a dynamism of evil. In the brilliant *Theses* which in 1539 he wrote for a so-called 'Circular Disputation' at Frankfurt, he spoke of the Papacy in such demonic terms, as one whose tyrannic and usurping rule took it across and without the three hierarchies of spiritual, temporal and domestic government. The Pope, he now said, is a kind of 'Werewolf', a destructive ravening figure, which must be dealt with as a mad dog, while the Emperor within this context became the Pope's mercenary, 'miles papae' and was therefore to be met with armed resistance by protestant princes. Some of his most scurrilous attacks on the Papacy come in his last writings, though he was not responsible for the obscene drawings with which Lukas Cranach illustrated his *Against the Papacy at Rome, founded by the Devil.*

But almost his last conversation brought in the menace of Rome, and the famous rhyme, 'Dying I will be thy death, O Pope' shows where he was right and where he was mistaken. He had indeed given a death blow to Popery, that is, the entanglement of the Papacy in law and political power, and an intolerable secularization. But the Papacy was another thing. He never abandoned his early emphasis on the Church as a communion of saints, but he had also to reckon more and more with the practical problems of a Volkskirche and in

1539 and 1541 he wrote two important treatises, *Of Councils and Churches* and *Wider Hans Worst*. The latter tract was written against the most disreputable of all his enemies, Duke Henry of Brunswick, who flaunted a large, blonde Wagnerian mistress, who hijacked the representatives of the city of Goslar to the Diet of Augsburg. Luther accordingly satirised him as 'Hans Worst' - Jack the Sausage - one is tempted to translate it as Henry the Hamburger. But in this tract can be found some of Luther's finest writing about the nature of the church, including the sentence 'O it is a high deep hidden thing is the Church which a man can only recognize by Faith, in Word and sacrament'.

Jesus Christ is the heart of Luther's religion: Christology was important for him because the Person and the Work of Christ were for him inseparable. In these years he has some fine discussions of the Incarnation, in the first place in connection with the eucharist. In 1539 he ceased to elevate the Host and it was rumoured that he had abandoned his doctrine of the Real Presence, and so once again he bitterly attacked Martin Bucer and the Swiss theologians, as well as the doctrines of Caspar Schwenckfeld. His two anti-Semitic writings, *Schem Hamphoras* and *The Last Words of David,* despite much that is indefensible, have some fine Christological passages as he defends the Christian doctrine against a Gnostic anti-Christian writing of the Jews which had turned up again.

Above all the people of Wittenberg were his concern, even though Bugenhagen was the parish priest. Here when health permitted he preached thousands of sermons to a congregation of perhaps two thousand, ignoring the dons and DDs, in going (as Dr Newton Flew used to tell us at Cambridge) to preach to 'Gladys in the gallery'.

He was greatly concerned about the worsening manners of the time which drove him to his famous one Professor Protest of August 1545. Other cities beside Wittenberg had been driven to take action against the notorious 'round dances' and the fact that one of Luther's maids had got into trouble led him to decide to leave Wittenberg. He wrote to his wife: 'I want to make arrangements to leave Wittenberg. My heart is cold towards it and I have no pleasure in the place any more'. Then he thought perhaps the town will act against the shameless St Vitus Dance, St John's Dance, where back and side go bare in shameless behaviour:

> I would rather wander round begging bread in my last days and old age than be martyred with the disorderly manners of Wittenberg, who thus requite my sour, dearly bought labours.

It was the ingratitude which hurt: there is more than a touch of Lear in the old man Luther.

In a pastoral way, too, he was concerned about the young people, and not least in his long fight against the canon law which decreed that secret engagements, the promise by a young couple

without witnesses, were legally binding as true lawful wedlock. He wrote a letter to the Elector which may appear rather modern.

> We have here in Wittenberg a great crowd of young people from many lands. And the girls have become very forward, chasing the young men into their bedrooms and inviting them to a free for all 'Love In'. I hear that some parents have recalled their children and are still doing so on the grounds that 'we send our children to you to study and you hang wives round their necks and this is getting our University a bad name.

Kaspar Bayer, a student, was a boarder at the Luther's and rather a favourite of Mrs Luther. Taking refuge with other students from the plague he was billetted in Torgau in the home of relatives of the Professor of Law at Wittenberg, Jerome Schürpf. They had an unmarried sister named Margaret living with them and took care to leave the young people together. Kaspar seems to have made some kind of declaration to her but never mentioned it at home and seemed to have forgotten it when he got back to Wittenberg, where he fell in love with Sibylla, an agreeable girl with a small fortune. When he became betrothed to her, Margaret's kinsfolk invoked the law and Professor Schurpf gave judgment in terms of canon law against Kaspar.

Suddenly, in Epiphany 1544, Luther jumped to the defence of his student in four tremendous sermons, the first of which went down in history as 'The Lawyer's Sweat Bath'. He attacked his old enemy, secret engagements, and told how as a young priest he had been horrified at so much anguish of conscience. 'They came to me and said, "Dear Father, help me! I was betrothed to Gretchen and now they say that Barbara is not my wife, and yet I sleep with Barbara. What shall I do? The girl I was secretly engaged to is not my wife - I shall be damned"'. Luther said he was told by his superiors to counsel the distracted young man that he must continue to live with Barbara, but to lie by her side in chastity, and to keep Gretchen in his heart as his true wife. Luther had no trouble in showing the inhumanity of it all.

So he denounced secret engagements:

> They are a bogy of the devil and a blasphemy against God, a wicked murderous ploy of the Devil himself. I, Dr Martin Luther, order you not to receive such engagements but to cast them into the abyss of hell, in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

He blamed the lawyers for going by the book, by the old canon law, when the Bible, the Evangelical theology and the preaching of Bugenhagen and Luther provides material for new trials and judgments:

> those proud junkers, the lawyers, they do not read our books, they have no regard for our churches - so give

> thanks to the Devil you hardened, blind lawyers... Somebody ought to take your tongue and wrap it round your neck - such confusion you have caused.

For Luther the evil was that it brought the consciences of young people into agony and confusion, and he again spoke of how, as a young parson, people had come to him in the greatest distress of mind. In his last sermon he made an apology to the good lawyers and told the young men they should take their calling as a solemn obligation from God - but keep clear of Popery! With the aid of Chancellor Brück, the great layman Luther called 'the Atlas of the Kingdom', Kaspar Bayer won the appeal and was at last united with Sibylla, while Margaret soon after married a citizen of renown. Melanchthon had agonised to see his long work of getting the two faculties together endangered, but Luther was prepared to take such action, for conscience sake and for one rather silly undergraduate.

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Illness often interrupted his preaching, for he was a chronic invalid and, with that melancholy which goes with deep humour, something of a valetudinarian. His mind and body were exhausted by the immense events and the prodigious mental output of the years. The marvellous sixteenth volume of the Weimar edition of his letters, out of which a biography could be written by itself, has several hundred references to his illnesses in every part of his body: gout, ulcerated leg, Myneres disease, fainting fits, catarrh, constipation, piles, and, what looks so dire in the German, a 'Nasen Hohlen entzundung' which may have been no more than inflammation of the nose. There was also the stone which nearly killed him in a great crisis in 1537 when he had a bladder stoppage for eight days and did not expect to recover, and the angina pectoris of which perhaps he died. But he kept up his great correspondence, and nearly 400 letters from the last years of his life have survived. Many are serious and complex memoranda on theological and political issues, many more about finding jobs for old students and pastors, together with academic notes written as Dean of the Faculty. There were homely intimate notes to old friends. For it was a time of the parting of friends, faithful old George Spalatin and his daughter Magdalena, and old enemies, too, like Andrew Karlstadt and John Eck, though old Albert of Mainz still hung obstinately on: 'I don't mind him going to hell; but I wish he wouldn't hurry as though he were frightened of being late'. There are some fine letters of consolation. When Jerome Baumgartner of Nuremberg was kidnapped on his way home from the Diet of Speyer in 1544 and shut up in prison for many months, Luther wrote a letter to his wife which she kept and over which she wept with her husband when at last he came home. He interceded for Karlstadt's widow and for Staupitz's aged elder sister. And when George Spalatin made an absolute ass of himself by marrying a man to his stepmother and in remorse became dangerously sick, Luther marshalled all his memories, saying things he had not written since 1516, in a wonderful letter of encouragement and absolution, so fine that it was copied and circulated among his friends. Myconius of Gotha sent it on to John Lange with the

comment:

> I am sending you the letter which Dr Martin sent to Spalatin... Luther, that most expert doctor of all expert doctors in all pertaining to morbid, afflicted and dead consciences.

Although Luther disliked young noblemen as a class, it was a quarrel between two young princes, Count Philip and Count John George of Mansfeld, which brought about his last adventure. They had bitterly quarrelled over two matters. One, the rights of patronage for St Andrew's church, was a fairly simple affair, demanding no legal expertise and it was to be settled by an equity decision of Luther. The other was an intricate matter of jurisprudence which dragged on until 1572! Luther as a 'landeskind' felt the scandal and dragged Melanchthon and Justus Jonas into a visit, only to find the princes away from home. But he left a moving and memorable note behind.

> I have not come in the hope of being allowed to act as a judge... but I hoped by preaching and admonition and prayer to be of some help to make peace... I will willingly risk my life if it can prevent harm to our dear principality so richly endowed not only with worldly goods but with fine intelligent gifted men and women and what is most important with the pure word of God and a church rightly ordered so that it is with great grief that I see that the foul Devil threatens this little Paradise. May God break him. It is high time.

In January 1546 he set out to keep his promise. It was a bitter winter with ice and snow and Melanchthon could not face the journey. Katherine was in an ecstasy of anxiety and there must have been sharp argument about the eighty mile journey. Justus Jonas had an ulcerated leg, but went along. The journey was to show Luther at his worst and at his best, as his letters show:

> To my dear heart, my wife, the Lady Katherine, Doctoress of Divinity, High Keeper of the Pig Market, grace and peace. My poor old darling, I was taken faint before Eisleben... my fault but if you had been here you would have blamed it on the Jews. I hear that in Eisleben there are fifty in one batch... when we have settled this business I must do something about those Jews.

What may have been his last sermon, a tired almost breathless homily, was an evangelical sermon but it ended with an attack on the Jews.

> I see the Jews among you still. Now we have to deal with them in a Christian way and try to bring them to the Christian faith that they may receive the true Messiah... they must be invited to turn to him - if not we must not suffer them to remain for they daily abuse and blaspheme

> Christ.

And then on 14th February his last letter:

> We hope to leave for home this week... the two young lords are brothers again, and we have invited them to be my guests...

and his characteristic last word, 'We will wait and see what God will do'.

The whole experience had been too strenuous: days of intricate argument, preaching and celebrations and ordinations and the like. It was he who kept the conversation going at meals. His teenage sons, with Jonas, made the family circle, and there were even more little jokes and banter with the servants than usual. Later they remembered how they heard him at his prayers, standing as was his wont before an open window looking at the trees and sky. After supper on the evening of the seventeenth, he suddenly clutched his chest but refused a doctor and lay down, waking a few hours later in a cold sweat. They rushed for doctors and told Count Albert and his wife, who came with precious useless medicine, 'unicorn's horn'. His most intimate enemy, the Devil, does not seem to have been among those present: he had slunk away. Only too far away was his wife, who many months later still choked with grief at the very thought of him.

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Once this old man had shaken nations and moved the great ones of the earth. Now history passed on, its surface hardly ruffled. Five hundred years later men came to that little town, where he had been born and where he died, to do him honour. They included a Cardinal and Archbishops, and representatives of that great world-wide communion of his sons in the gospel. Had he chosen a text it might have been 'Give God the glory. As for this man we know that he is a sinner'. For as his last written words seem to have said, 'Poor beggars aren't we all, and that's the truth'. Yet he might have been pleased to know that after 500 years so many would still thank God for his servant, Martin Luther.

GORDON RUPP

(Professor Rupp died while this volume was in the press)