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The Place of Symbolism in the Word and Sacraments To-day¹

BY THE REV. PHILIP E. HUGHES, M.A., B.D., D.Litt.

A SYMBOL is a sign, and a sign is by its nature *significant*; it is a pointer to a reality beyond itself. The particular function of symbolism is to point meaningfully to the unseen reality which lies beyond the apprehension of our physical senses, but which none the less is at least in some measure apprehensible by man in his capacity as a spiritual being. The use of symbolism is an acknowledgment on man's part that there is an unseen and greater reality beyond the limits of his own mundane and finite experience. It is the language of suggestion, pointing away to ultimacies which exist but may not be concretely defined. It is, in the last analysis, the language of finitude on the border of infinity, of man the creature in relation to the limitless person and activity of his Creator.

As a universal mode of expression, symbolism, indeed, clearly indicates that man, whether savage or civilized, is at his centre a *religious* being. It is quite fallacious to imagine that symbolism is a device appropriate only or mainly to children and simple souls. On the contrary, the greatest minds in the highest cultures have found it indispensable, and continue to find it so. By way of illustration, it is sufficient to mention the mathematical symbolism of the philosophers Russell and Whitehead, as expounded in their *Principia Mathematica* (or, for that matter, the mathematical symbolism of the ancient Pythagoreans), and the symbolist movement in poetry, which aims by means of suggestion and verbal adumbration to evoke a vista, and thereby, as it were, move across the threshold of that further world of reality which transcends the range of human terminology.

In the hands of unbelievers, symbolism is not only a tacit admission of finitude in the face of the greater and indefinable reality which envelopes and penetrates all; it is also an expression of human sinfulness in so far as it represents an attempt to reach out to an unseen and mysterious circumference, as though man, despite his finitude, were the centre of reality, and himself, in some sense, the creator of that which lies beyond. All philosophies and systems of human thought are symbolical of this same thing, for they reflect man's lostness in the universe in which he finds himself, and his desperate longing to comprehend and explain things in their wholeness, and thereby to justify his own existence. But because of his finiteness it is quite beyond his capacity to grasp the whole, and because of his sinfulness he refuses and overturns that truth which is never absent from him—the truth, namely, of the supremacy and centrality of Almighty God, whose image he bears and in accordance with whose mind his environment is ordered. Hence the failure and futility of man's philosophical structures to satisfy the uncertainty at the heart of his being. In apostate

¹ A paper given at the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen held at St. Peter's Hall, September, 1957.

thought symbolism is (if I may borrow the words of Herman Dooyeweerd used with reference to another aspect of this same fundamental question) "a symptom of the internal unrest of an uprooted existence which no longer understands itself" (*A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. III, p. 784).

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With Christian symbolism, however, the case is different. The Christian man, it is true, is still finite—hence the continuing need of symbolism for him also. But the vital difference lies in the fact that he has been redeemed from the power of sin—which does not mean that he is sinless, but does mean that his view of himself and the world has been restored to its true perspective. This perspective places God at the centre of reality, as the sovereign Creator and Governor of the universe. Man's knowledge of the meaning of things must, if it is to be correct, be in accordance with the mind of God. And the divine mind is disclosed in a twofold revelation. There is, to begin with, the *general* revelation of the entire order of creation, of which no man can plead ignorance, both because it confronts him whichever way he turns, and also because he himself constitutionally belongs to this order, and it is impossible to escape from the testimony of his own being. To the redeemed intellect, now restored to its pristine sanity, nothing is more natural and congenial than to understand every constituent element of the universe as a symbol of the eternal power and godhead of Him who is the Author of all. Every created entity points away beyond itself to the majesty of its Maker (cf. Rom. i. 18ff. ; Ps. xix. 1ff.). "The whole earth is full of His glory" (Is. vi. 3).

But the mind of God is still more precisely disclosed to man in the *special* revelation of Holy Scripture, the light of which is focussed on the person and work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, in whom God's purposes of grace and judgment are concentrated. That symbolism has an important place in God's special revelation is obvious to every student of Scripture. The question which we must ask is whether the symbolism of Scripture has significance for modern man and is relevant to the situation in which he finds himself. In a densely populated industrial area, for example, where the earth is covered not with grass but with macadam and paving-stones, have we any justification for expecting people to grasp the significance of the expression "Lamb of God" as applied to Christ? When John the Baptist described our Lord in this way it was unnecessary for him to offer his audience any explanation, since they were all thoroughly familiar with the sacrificial sin-offerings of the Mosaic law, and this particular symbol applied to Christ was consequently full of meaning for them. But to the twentieth-century city-dweller the term "lamb" conveys little apart from the Sunday joint or its use as a term of endearment. Is not this a symbol which has lost its content, and ought it not therefore to be abandoned?

The fallacy of the method of accommodation implicit in a question of this sort lies in the assumption that modern industrial man is incapable of comprehending anything which is not couched in the terms of the mechanization and materialism of his physical environment.

After all, his daily life is not limited to the factory and the conveyor-belt. Even if he neglects the art of reading, he is daily carried outside of his immediate environment by the visual media of the cinema and television; and, furthermore, in these days of rapid transportation and equal distribution of wealth, modern man, whether "working class" or not, has very definitely become a *travelling* creature at least once a year, when he takes his annual holiday. The countryside is not something remote from his comprehensibility. And can it seriously be maintained that the concept of sacrifice implicit in a symbolical expression such as "Lamb of God" is alien to modern man, living as he does in an age of global warfare and bloodshed? Scriptural symbolism is full of rich significance: if for the supposed convenience of modern man it is abandoned, the Church's spiritual fare will be seriously impoverished and we must not be surprised to find such a diet producing Christians (if it produces Christians at all) who are spiritually scrawny and anæmic.

Christian preachers and instructors, for their part, must always remember, however, that there is no such thing as a *bare* symbol. A symbol unexplained, or a symbol not understood, is in fact no symbol at all. Instead of clarifying, it confuses. Accordingly, a symbol, such as the term "Lamb" when applied to Christ, must be expounded, and it must be expounded in the light of its scriptural setting and content. Duly expounded, there is no surer way than that of scriptural symbolism for the successful communication of such essential Christian concepts as sacrifice, substitution, reconciliation, and so on.

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We must give some attention to another form of symbolism employed in Holy Scripture which in recent years has suffered much misrepresentation. I refer to the symbolism of (in the main) certain prepositions and adverbs. Bultmann, Brunner, and others have assured us that the cosmology of the Bible is that of a three-storey universe, with heaven up above on the top floor, hell down below in the basement, and ourselves in between on the ground level. The fact of the matter is, however, that those who propound such a view are reading the cosmology of the Middle Ages into the Bible. Questions concerning the measurement and locality of spiritual entities fascinated the medieval mind in a manner which is foreign to the scriptural authors. There are two things which may be said here. Firstly, in the Bible the description of phenomena is that of naïve, pre-theoretical experience. In saying this I certainly do not mean to imply that the experience of modern man in our western civilization is no longer naïve and pre-theoretical. On the contrary, it is just this. His use of the inventions of our age, whether it be the aeroplane or the washing-machine, is not contingent on an abstract, theoretical understanding of their mechanism. They form part of the concrete horizon of his daily temporal experience. He approaches them as phenomena, not noumena.

Thus it is that twentieth-century man has no more compunction than first-century man had about speaking of the rising and setting of the sun, for that is an adequate and accurate description from the

point of view of the terrestrial observer, and it by no means necessarily indicates a mistaken cosmology. Thus also the Apostles who witnessed our Lord's departure from this earthly scene rightly described it as a going *up*, for that is precisely how this phenomenon appeared to them. The fact that from the point of view of a person on the opposite side of the earth a simultaneously ascending object must have moved in exactly the opposite direction does not stultify the use of such terminology—indeed, there is no other terminology available. But, it may be asked, what about the concept of a going *up into heaven*? Does not this imply that heaven is a *locality* on the cosmic map? and does not the fact that the earth is (a) spherical and (b) rapidly revolving, make nonsense of such a concept?—for bodies moving “upward” (that is, outward into space) from different points on the surface of a sphere, so far from converging on a single meeting-point, will become increasingly distant from each other; and a *revolving* sphere complicates the issue still further, since an ascent from the identical spot from which Christ ascended will not guarantee a journey in the same direction as He took.

The answer to queries of this nature involves the second thing which I wish to say: namely, that the concepts implied by terms such as “up” and “down”, “above” and “below”, when not used to describe phenomenal occurrences, are essentially *symbolical* in their significance. The Apostles saw Christ ascending, but they did *not* see Him honoured at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Their language describing the former is phenomenal; that describing the latter is symbolical. But we must not be misled into imagining that the phenomenal is more real than the symbolical; for, on the contrary, scriptural symbolism points away to a reality which far surpasses the narrow limits of our present terrestrial experience.

In every age, and in every language, it is common for prepositions and adverbs such as we have mentioned to be charged with symbolical significance. Accordingly, when we speak of a man as being “above” others in intelligence, or of soldiers as being “under” an officer, we are speaking symbolically, and not in terms of space and locality; or when a schoolboy moves “up” by yearly stages from the lowest to the sixth form we do not conclude that his school is a six-storey building with the sixth form on the top floor. And so it is with the Bible: language which, for example, describes God as reigning on a throne in heaven above does not mean that God is in human form occupying a material seat on the surface of a star or in some circumscribed locality in outer space; for it is *symbolical* language, the purpose of which is to convey the notion of God as absolutely and sovereignly transcendent in being, dignity, and glory; and none but symbolical language is adequate to convey such a notion.

In short, words must be interpreted in the light of the context in which they occur. If they are used symbolically, they must be understood symbolically; if they are used phenomenally, they must be understood phenomenally. Taken in isolation, words may be twisted this way and that to mean almost anything; but when respect is had to the context a word assumes a character and a significance with which no honest interpreter may tamper. If there is one thing we

learn from the revelation of Scripture it is that words are important. But while we who hold a high doctrine of Scripture recognize this fact, we must always remember that words are important only as units of *meaning*, and that their meaning is governed by the language which precedes or follows them. A word in isolation ceases to fulfil its proper function. Hence the ever-present task of exegesis.

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History has shown that to venerate the text as though the words themselves were possessed of mystical potencies leads to ultra-verbalism for which the context becomes of secondary importance. And the ultra-verbalist becomes an ultra-symbolist who discovers in single words, and even letters, in isolation extraordinary significances which are entirely independent of the context in which they are placed. An example of this is the explanation given in the Epistle of Barnabas of the number 318, mentioned in Genesis xiv. 14, as a number which contains symbolically the mystery of the cross of Jesus. This is demonstrated by the application of the technique of *gematria* (in accordance with which each letter of the alphabet represents a distinctive number) as follows : the Greek *Tau* = 300 and is at the same time by its shape a symbol of the cross, *Iota* = 10, and *Eta* = 8, and these are the first two letters of the name " Jesus " in Greek—

$$\begin{aligned} 300 &= T \\ 10 &= I \\ 8 &= H \end{aligned}$$

$$318 = TIH = T \text{ (the cross) } + IH[\Sigma OY\Sigma]$$

(Epistle of Barnabas, ch. ix ; cf. Clem. Alex., *Strom.*, VI, 11). The rabbinical authors, however, though applying the same technique, arrived at a very different conclusion, for they discovered that the *gematria* of the Hebrew name " Eliezer ", Abraham's servant (Gen. xv. 2), was 318 — אֵלִיעֶזֶר = 1+30+10+70+7+200 = 318 — and accordingly interpreted Abraham's 318 " trained men " to mean the one person of Eliezer alone !

In the concluding section of his *Heptaplus* the Christian Cabalist Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) uses a different technique, that of *temurah* (that is, the transposition and recombination of the component letters of a word to form a series of new words), to demonstrate that in the first words of Holy Scripture, namely בְּרֵאשִׁית (" In the beginning "), there lies concealed the doctrine that it was in and through the Son, who is the beginning and the end, that the Father created both the cosmic universe and also man the microcosm ! For the Cabalist, indeed, whether Christian or Jewish, the whole Torah constituted a vast *corpus symbolicum* in which not only every word, but every letter, and every component part of each letter, was a symbol charged with profound mystic and transcendental significance (cf. Gershom G. Scholem : *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 209 f. New York, 1946). Compared with this hidden esoteric significance the plain outward meaning of the text was regarded as a crude husk, of worth only to the common and uncontentplative masses.

It is to the Reformers of the sixteenth century that we owe deliverance from such fantastic and unnatural verbal manipulations. By their exposition of Holy Scripture, which showed proper respect for words as units of meaning within the framework of their context, the Reformers taught the Church once again that the text should be understood in its plainest and most natural sense, and should not be treated as a prospecting-ground for the unearthing of symbolical curiosities. An excess of symbolism leads to *mystery* religion, comprehensible only to the few who have been initiated into its dark secrets. But the symbolism of Scripture, like the revelation of which it forms a part, is addressed to all mankind; simplicity is its mark, and instruction and clarification its purpose.

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A symbol, as we have said, points away from itself to a transcendent reality which lies beyond. It is not one and the same with the reality which it portends. Of this principle the Church needs constantly to be reminded, particularly in connection with her sacramental theology. Of the symbols authorized by Holy Scripture the Sacraments are the most arresting, since their character is not only verbal but also *visual*. Verbal symbols, of course, conjure up a mental picture; but a Sacrament is a concrete sign presented to the physical senses. Thus the Church Catechism defines a Sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us". A Sacrament, in other words, is a symbol pointing beyond itself to the reality of divine grace. It is a visible pledge and seal of the Gospel. As Augustine has said, "the Word is added to the element and there results the Sacrament, as if itself also a kind of *visible* Word" (Tract. LXXX, 3, on the Gospel of John). Dissociate it from the Gospel word of grace and it ceases to be a Sacrament. On the other hand, identify it with the reality which it signifies, and it ceases to be a symbol.

Accordingly, it is affirmed by Augustine that "those things are sacraments in which not what they are but what they display is always considered, since they are *signs* of things, being one thing in themselves and yet signifying another thing" (*Con. Maxim.*, ii. 22); and Hooker writes that the sacraments "are not really nor do really contain in themselves that grace which with them or by them it pleaseth God to bestow" (*Eccles. Pol.*, V. lxvii, 6). Hooker also offers an astute comment on the inconsistency of those who identify the sacrament with the reality of which it is the sign in the case of Holy Communion, but forbear to do so in the case of Baptism: "If on all sides it be confessed", he says, "that the grace of Baptism is poured into the soul of man, that by water we receive it although it be neither seated in the water nor the water changed into it, what should induce men to think that the grace of the Eucharist must needs be in the Eucharist before it can be in us that receive it?" (*ibid.*).

The view that there is in this respect a "fundamental distinction between Baptism and the Eucharist" has been recently defended by Dr. L. S. Thornton on the ground that in Baptism "the earthly element is instrumental to the transformation of man", whereas in the Eucharist "the earthly elements are themselves transformed".

In connection with both Baptism and the Eucharist he speaks of *identification*. In the former it is the baptized individual who is identified with the sacrifice of Christ ; and this is an identification by way of symbol, in accordance with the death-burial-resurrection symbolism of baptism. But in the latter it is the elements of bread and wine, that is, the symbols themselves, which Dr. Thornton declares to be identified with the sacrifice of Christ ; and in this case the identification is described by him as *creative*. We are, it seems, to understand that the duly authorized repetition of the words of consecration over the elements effects their transformation, as by an act of creation, into the body and blood of Christ. (*The Form of the Servant, III : Christ and the Church*, pp. 109 f. London. 1956.)

The method or "mechanics" of this alleged transformation is explained by Dr. E. L. Mascall in the following words : "Just as, in the case of the Incarnation, it is right to say that Christ 'came down from heaven' to Bethlehem, so long as we remember that this took place 'not by conversion of Godhead into flesh but by taking up of manhood into God', so, in the case of the Eucharist, it is right to say that Christ 'comes down from heaven' on to our altars, so long as we remember that the manner of this descent is not a conversion of Christ into bread but a taking up of bread into Christ" (*Christ, the Christian, and the Church*, p. 198. Second impression, London. 1955). At the Eucharist, in other words, there is an assumption of "breadness" by Christ—a hypothesis, incidentally, which was advanced by John of Damascus in the eighth century and by Pico della Mirandola in the fifteenth century, and which continues to-day to be the accepted doctrine in the Greek Church—though Dr. Mascall disavows that the eucharistic change supposedly effected is the same thing as a hypostatic union. Historic Anglicanism, however, does not speak of the descent and localization of Christ at the Sacrament, but keeps closer to scriptural thought in regarding the Holy Communion as a means of grace whereby rather we may be uplifted in spirit to heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This idea is admirably expressed in the collect of Ascension Day : "Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens, so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend and with him continually dwell" (cf. Eph. ii. 6 ; Col. iii. 1).

Dr. Mascall seeks to sustain his hypothesis of the presence of Christ on the eucharistic altar by speaking of the incarnate body of Christ as existing under three different modes—natural, mystical, and sacramental. "As a natural Body," he says, "it was seen on earth, hung on the Cross, rose in glory on the first Easter Day, and was taken into heaven in the Ascension ; as a mystical Body it appeared on earth on the first Whit-Sunday and we know it as the Holy Catholic Church ; as a sacramental Body it becomes present on our altars at every Eucharist when, by the operation of the Holy Ghost and the priestly act of Christ, bread and wine are transformed into, and made one with, the glorified Body which is in heaven" (*op. cit.*, pp. 161 f.). In harmony with the theological hypothesis of progressive organic evolutionism (of which Dr. L. S. Thornton has become the main exponent), which postulates that each new organic level in the evolutionary

process includes and elevates within itself every lower and anterior level, and which regards the incarnation as the predestined consummation of the whole order of creation, Dr. Mascall envisages the eucharistic elements as being "taken up into the supernatural order and identified with the holy things which they contain" (*op. cit.*, p. 197).

It will be noticed that Dr. Mascall does *not* propound a doctrine of transubstantiation; but it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the implications of his sacramental doctrine for the worshipping community are little if any different from those of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Identification of the sacramental symbols of the body and blood of Christ with the reality to which they point must be expected to encourage acts of veneration of earthly objects such as our Reformers denounced as idolatrous. Belief that the consecrated elements are transformed into and made one with Christ's glorified body, by whatever process, is a perversion and indeed a destruction of symbolism and leads inevitably to the reservation and adoration of the Sacrament. It is a belief, further, which carries with it the strange and disabling anomaly that, of every supposedly priestly act of consecration and transformation of the elements, that alone of Christ Himself, the divine Author of the Sacrament, was void of effect, for when He said of the bread, "This is My body," and of the wine, "This is My blood," by no stretch of the imagination could His apostles have understood these words in a literalistic or phenomenal sense, nor could they have interpreted them in a modalistic manner, as though Christ had meant, "I am locally present in these elements, though under a sacramental mode," for the evident reason that at that very time when He was instituting this Sacrament and uttering these sentences His humanity, flesh and blood intact, was locally and visibly present before them. Our Lord's words must, accordingly, have been understood by them in a symbolical sense.

The symbolism of the sacraments, and in particular of the Holy Communion, is at all times a subject of vital importance for the Church of Christ. "Eucharistic doctrine" (if I may quote from the memorable sermon preached in the University Church of Oxford some two years ago by the Bishop of Rochester) "is, indeed, fundamental both to faith and worship. It is the touchstone that determines whether God is worshipped in spirit and in truth, or whether a church is falling away into superstition and error. To worship the Blessed Sacrament as 'He', instead of reverencing 'It', to teach that the consecrated bread and wine contain a localized Christ, instead of conveying to the worthy receiver a Presence that is already 'in the midst'; this, on Ridley's showing, is 'false doctrine' and 'idolatrous use'. History, too, exposes such a conception as one that inevitably exchanges the Living Christ for a mediatory Church and a priesthood that creates the 'Victim of the Altar'" (*The Oxford Martyrs*, pp. 9 f. London. 1955).

If the elaboration in the post-apostolic centuries of distinctively sacerdotal doctrine and ritual in connection with the Lord's Supper must, as Harnack says, "be reckoned amongst the most serious hindrances which the Gospel has experienced in the course of its history",

and if, as he also says, "in the whole history of religions there is probably no second example of such a transformation, extension, demoralization, and narrowing of a simple and sacred institution" (*History of Dogma*, Vol. IV, ch. iv), we who have inherited doctrine and ritual which have been reformed in the light of the Word of God, and who hold in trust a eucharistic worship which the Bishop of Rochester has described as "the purest, the most Scriptural, and the most Catholic in Christendom" (*op. cit.*, p. 11), must constantly submit our thoughts and ways, and not least our symbolism, to the same searching and reforming ray of God's Word. Not till she enters into the eternal reality of the heavenly glory will the Church of Christ be able to dispense with symbolism; but meanwhile the responsibility rests upon us to ensure, as far as in us lies, that the simplicity and comprehensibility of the scriptural pattern are not again obscured.

Ways of Prayer— Catholic and Protestant—I

BY THE REV. DOUGLAS WEBSTER, M.A.¹

IN the Bible we are confronted constantly with the practice of prayer: we are never presented with a discussion of prayer or that which the modern mind so restlessly seeks—a rationale of prayer. We see and hear men and women at prayer, usually during moments of special significance in their lives. Mostly these prayers are dominated by one thought only, though sometimes, as in certain of the psalms, there is a progression from bitterness and complaint to acceptance and trust and peace. On a number of occasions there is an element of apparent rudeness in the manner of address some of the psalmists use to the Almighty, "Up, Lord, why sleepest thou?" They do not hesitate to argue with God and to challenge Him: "Lord, how long shall the ungodly, how long shall the ungodly triumph?" (Psalm xciv. 3). Psalm lxxxix goes so far as to accuse God of breaking His covenant promises. Whatever may be said about the psalms being a treasury of devotion, we do well to remember that they are also an unrivalled example of utterly uninhibited talk with God.

In the New Testament we are given certain prayers of our Lord, all very brief except that in St. John xvii. The epistles of St. Paul provide a fair measure of material illustrating the content of the apostle's own prayers, mostly of intercession for the Churches. There is no passage of any considerable length which treats of prayer, but there are some warnings and promises, assertions and injunctions. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the Biblical data, except in so far as it affects ways of prayer which have developed subsequently. We may note, however—and this is to quote from Raymond George—

¹ Condensed from a paper read at the 1957 Conference of the Evangelical Fellowship of Theological Literature.